Performing Arts of Orissa

JEEVAN PANI



PERFORMING ARTS
OF ORISSA

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Prafulla

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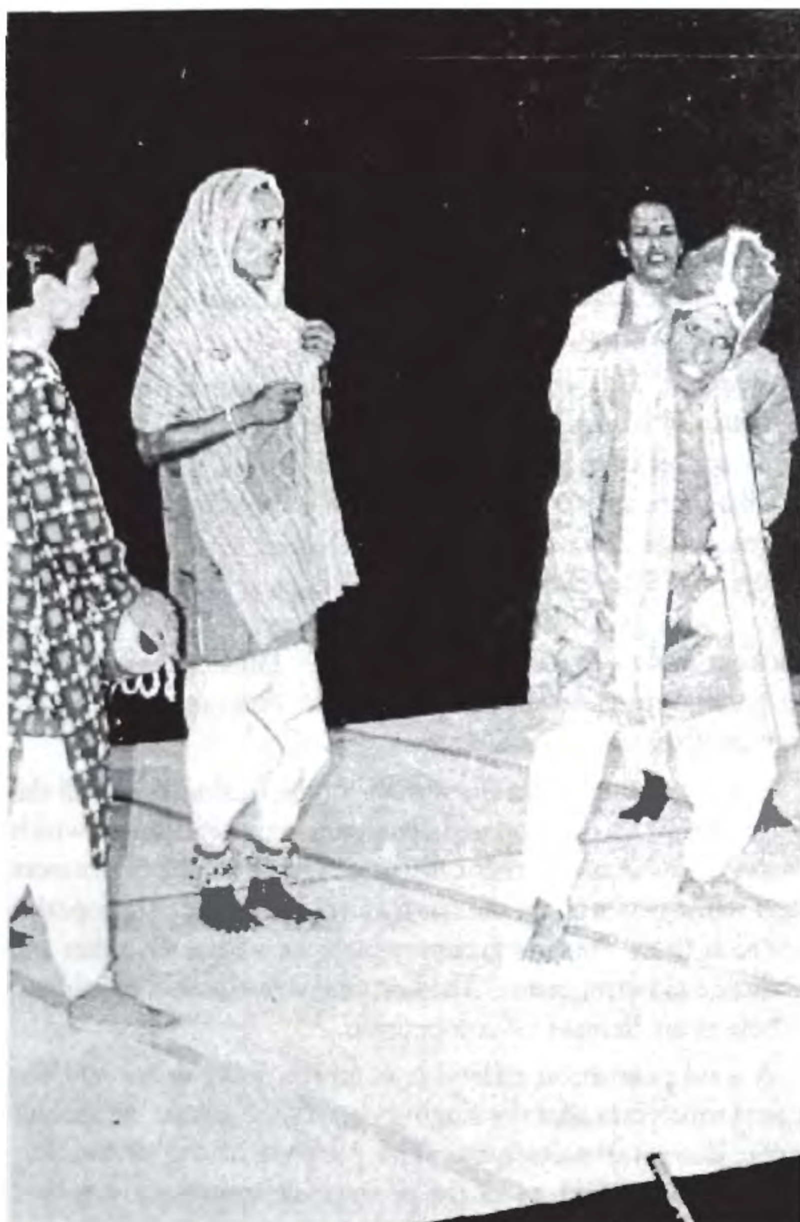
Ballad Singing Traditions of Orissa

In almost all the regions of this country various forms of ballad singing forms are prevalent. Some of the well known forms are: *Paamdavaani* of Madhya Pradesh, *Pawaadaa* of Maharastra, *Aalhaa* of Uttar Pradesh, *Heer-Raanjhaa* of Punjab, *Chaaran-geet* of Rajasthan, etc. Orissa has several styles of ballad singing, of which two are more fascinating: *Paalaa* and *Daaskaathiaa*. The former is more sophisticated.

Paalaa: This is a unique form of ballad singing that aesthetically blends elements of theatre, classical Odissi music, highly sophisticated Oriya and Sanskrit poetry, wit and humor. Usually, there are six to seven performers in a group of Paalaa singers. It can not be traditionally presented with less than four performers. The leading singer is called *gaana* (also *gaayaka*), the percussionist is called *baana* who plays a two-faced drum called *mrudanga*, and two to five associate singers called *paalias* of which the leading one is called shreepaaliaa. The ordinary paaliaas play large cymbals called *kartaal*.

Paalaa is presented in three ways: in the *baithaki paalaa* all the performers sit on the ground throughout; in the *thiaa paalaa*, which is more popular and aesthetically more satisfying, the performers stand while performing, the *baadi paalaa* is a kind of thiaa paalaa in which there are two groups which vie with each other for excellence in performance. The last kind is the most entertaining, as there is an element of competition.

A loud percussion ensemble comprising the drum and the large cymbals precedes the singing. In this the gaana, the leading singer, does not participate. The purpose of the percussion ensemble is two-fold: to let the prospective audience know that



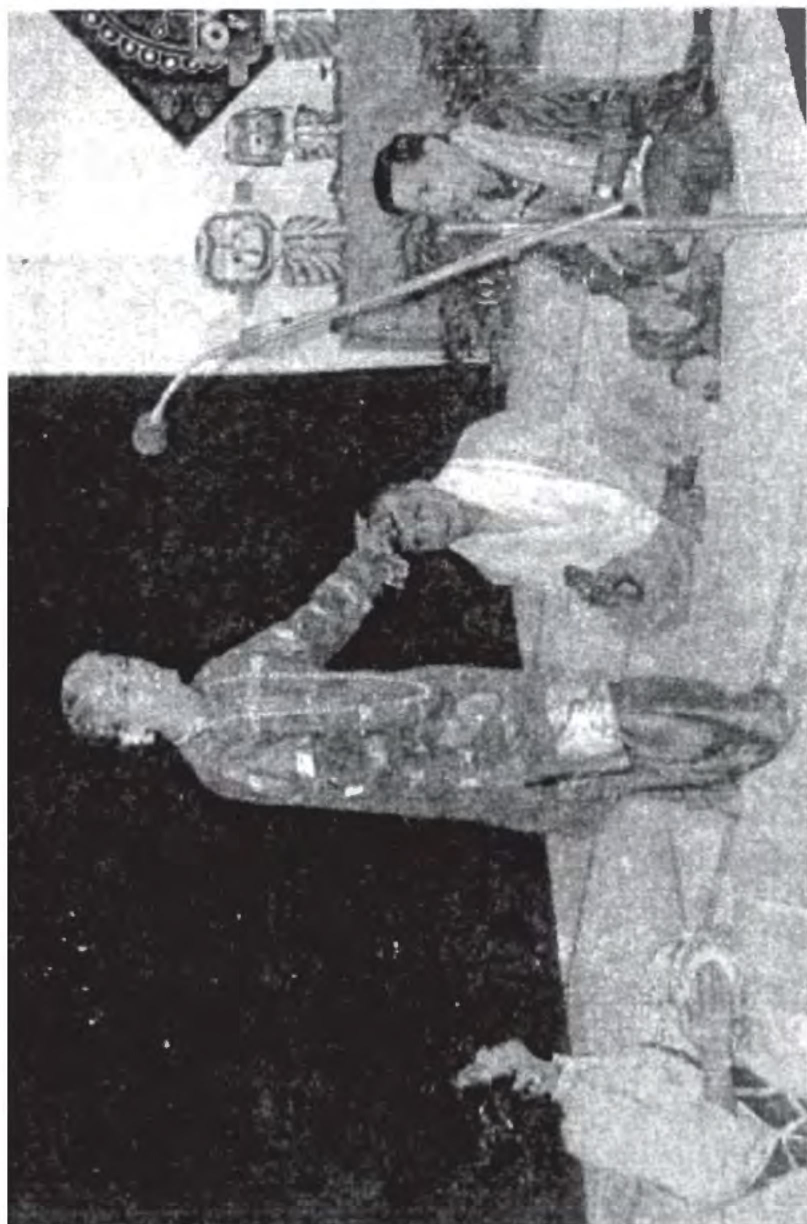
the paalaa is going to be presented soon and the other is to serve as aesthetic prelude *(poorvaranga)*. In the rural areas, the audience comes to the performance after taking their dinner. Therefore, is begins usually around 8.30 to 9 P.M.

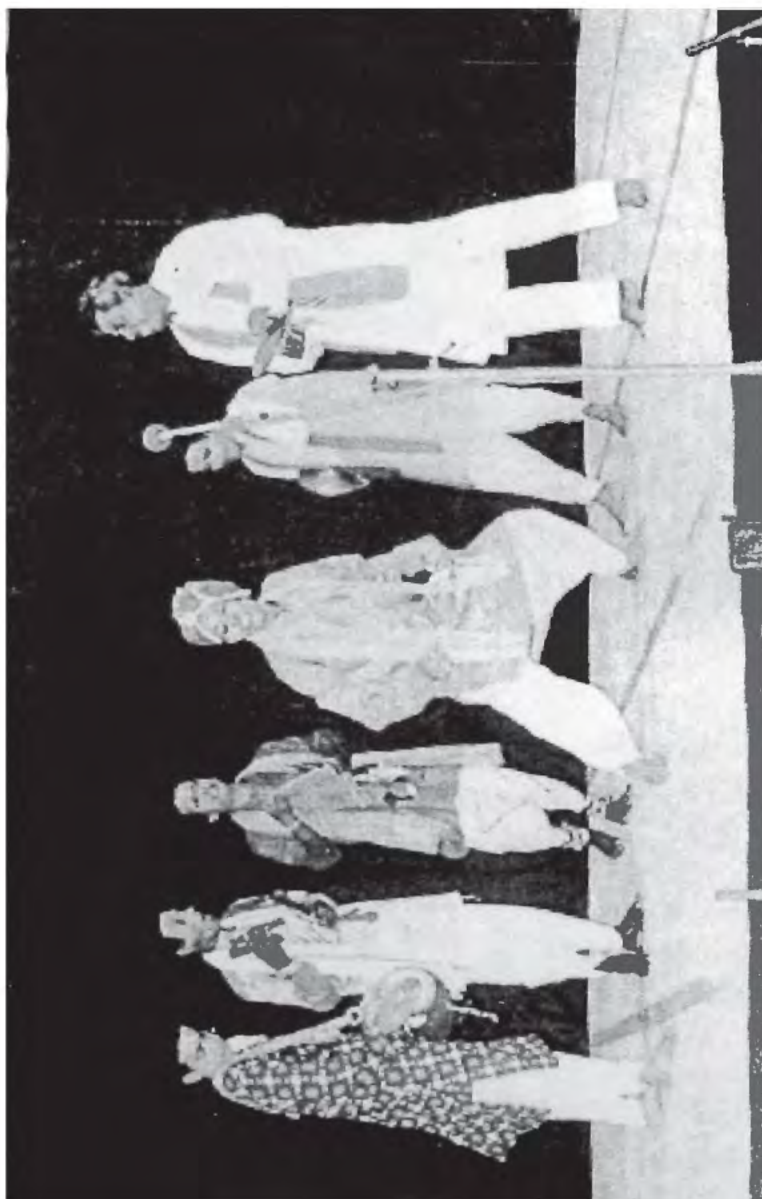
At the end of the musical prelude, the gaana enters into the arena. Usually, it is on the level ground over which a large cotton carpet is spread. The leading singer holds a flywhisk, called *chaamara*, in his hands, which he uses in different ways at different times. He begins with an invocation eulogizing the presiding deity. Traditionally, the paalaa is associated with the worship of *Satyapeer*, the deity that is accepted by both the Hindus and the Muslims. This trend can be traced back to the Mughal period when there was conscious efforts to bring about amity between the two religious faiths. After the invocation the paalaa proper begins. As in daaskaathiaa so also in paalaa the ballad is structured by the gaanaa himself, but the style of structuring differs. The major portions of the paalaa ballad are stanzas of highly ornate Oriya poems written by eminent poets between 17th and fourth decade of the 19th century. The poems and *kaavya*s (long narrative poems) written during this period were meant not only to be read but also to be sung in the *chhaanda* styles of various kinds. The gaana while structuring a particular paalaa ballad follows the same pattern as that of the classical Oriya kaavyas. A kaavya in its initial phase poetically narrates the birth of the hero and the heroine. Different cantos describe their growing up through the phases of infancy, adolescence, and youth. They meet and fall in love. Finally they marry. One or more cantos describe the beauty of the hero and especially the heroine in each phase of their growing up. The description of the beauty of the heroine from head to toe at her youthful best is given in great detail with wonderful similes. The paalaa ballad has the same structure. The

descriptions of the various aspects of her/his beauty are not written by the gaana but taken directly from the kaavyas of different poets. For instance, the paalaa writer wants to describe the beauty of the eyes of a youthful heroine. He can take different relevant stanzas from various kaavyas written either in Oriya or Sanskrit and attribute them all to the heroine of the paalaa. Thus borrowing from various poets the description of the beauty of the heroine's eyes may go on for hours. The gaana not only sings their stanzas in appropriate chhaanda style, but also explains the meaning of the highly ornate lines in simple language. Thus through the paalaa sophisticated poetry was being popularized among common people. If the gaana is not talented enough to structure a paalaa ballad, he may requisition the services of a suitable literary person to structure it for him. But he has to have an extraordinary memory to remember all the countless stanzas and a high degree of literary sensibility so that he can properly explain the meaning as well as the poetic merit to the common people. The singer who accepts to participate in a baadi paalaa has indeed a phenomenal memory and ready wit, because the other singer may challenge him on any aspect of the paalaa.

The gaana is also an excellent actor. While singing or explaining he brings in dramatic acting to heighten the appeal. He then uses his flywhisk as different properties. At one time if it is used as the thunderbolt of god Indra, another time it may delineate the lyrical movement of waves and yet at another time the contour of a graceful creeper. He usually wears a costume similar to the formal dress of the erstwhile royal nobility. The others in the group wear also a kind of costume, which is not so splendid.

The role of the paaliaas is, more or less, like that of the chorus boys. They sing the refrain of the song together with the gaana and echo the last few words of the other sung lines. The role of





shreepaaliaa is of great importance in the performance as it is he who frequently interacts with the gaana and punctuates the performance with wit and humor.

It is unfortunate that this unique, fascinating, and dignified tradition of performing art is gradually disappearing, because people are so addicted to the popular mass media that the number of persons, who would prefer a paalaa performance to a film or a television serial, is very few. To be a good gaana, besides multifaceted talent, one has to devote years of study and practice. It has to be a full time job. If one is not assured that the earning from this profession can make a decent living why one will be tempted to master this difficult art? The last great gaanas were Harinath and Niranjan. They were in great demand till the early 1950s. The demand grew less and less, but there were sporadic paalaa performances till mid-60s. Both are no longer there. None has come up who has even a fraction of their talent and excellence. Those groups who perform paalaa now are not even a shadow of the real art. They are at best amateurs, far from the excellence of a professional paalaa singer.

Daaskaathiaa: This is a fascinating form of ballad singing that admirably blends elements of theatre, music, wit and humor. It is, however, not as sophisticated as Paalaa. Daaskaathia requires only two singer actors for the performance, the duration of which may be from around two hours to eight hours, that is, the whole night, depending upon the audience and the theme of the ballad. The main singer is called gaayaka. He is assisted by the paaliaa. Both of them play a kind of castanets called daaskaathi from which the form has derived its name. The gaayaka plays bigger and different kind of castanets and it has also another name: Raamtaali. The gaayaka plays it sparingly. It is the paaliaa who is an expert in playing the smaller pair of



castanets called daaskaathi. He punctuates the performance with percussion music of highly complex and fascinating rhythmic passages. He also punctuates it with passages of wit and humor that enhance the appeal of the performance. Thus the importance of the paaliaa is no less than the main singer. The gaayaka must have very good voice, because it is he who sings the entire ballad and the paaliaa echoes only the last one or two words of the sung line.

The singing style is, more or less, in accordance with the chhaanda form of Odissi classical music. The themes of the ballads are usually drawn from the vast body of Indian mythological literature, especially those which have Oriya versions. Invariably the gaayaka himself composes the ballad in verse form taking interesting episodes from the mythology. The gaayaka not only sings but also explains and elaborates in impromptu prose. He wears a costume that is similar to what the erstwhile rulers wore on formal occasions.

In Daaskaathiaa the vocal music of the gaayaka is accompanied with the percussion music of the castanets. No other musical instrument is used in this form of ballad singing.

Although, Daaskaathiaa originated in the southern part of Orissa, especially in the district of Ganjam, it has now spread to the other parts. Most Daaskaathiaa singers are still in the Ganjam district.



Awardee - SMA - 1981
Baithyanath Sharma
Daskathia

Jatra of Eastern India

Unaided by any kind of prop or stage décor the Jatra actor stands like a dynamic tower inside the acting arena and his very presence powered by a kind of evocative theatricality suggests a complete scene around him. He is a versatile performer; well-versed in the arts of acting, mime, music, and dance. The presentational style of Jatra theatre gives him a sort of disciplined freedom and he sails from one art to another magnificently. In the words of Balwant Gargi, a Jatra actor can be recognised by the way he stands – a tilted tower. He does not hold himself back and throws his weight forward. Passionate, charged with energy, he explodes into fiery dialogue. He moves like a tornado in the small arena. In spite of continuous action, he has a firm grip on the ground.

Like many other forms of Indian *naatya*, Jatra does not limit the imagination of the audience by using stage settings. Even properties used are very few. The only stage property that is worth mentioning is a simple chair or stool which serves several purposes. If at one time it suggests a throne, at another time a temple. At some other time it may be used as a step of the bathing *ghaat*. And the audience finds absolutely no incongruity in it! Such is the alchemy of the evocative theatricality of Jatra theatre.

In differing presentational styles Jatra is prevalent in the States of eastern India, i.e. Orissa, West Bengal, Assam, and Manipur. In Assam, however, the traditional has been totally assimilated by the Vaisnavite Bhaaonaa theatre which, from 16th century, is being performed inside the premises of the Vaisnava monasteries called Satra. In other States, although the tradition has inspired a few minor theatre forms to evolve, such as Mogul Tamsa in Orissa



and Sumangaleela in Manipur, it still survives and is going strong under the original name – Jatra.

It is quite difficult to say when exactly this form of theatre took shape. The name Jatra which literally means 'journey', however, suggests that during the rudimentary phase it must have been a processional theatre. This hypothesis leads one to the fact that there are many religious ceremonies, now also prevalent all over the country, which have processional character. One of ceremonies performed at Puri is called *Sahijatra* (*Sahi*, in Oriya, means a colony in a city) which is unmistakably theatrical. It is performed every year for about a week beginning from the day of Rama-navamee which falls on the ninth day of the bright fortnight in the month of Chaitra (April-May). In this form of processional theatre no dialogue is spoken. Actors wearing highly stylized masks and costumes and ornate headgears go in a procession on the street or a sahi of Puri. Most of the characters represented in Sahijatra are from the *Ramayan*. Their gait in the procession is dance-like as they move rhythmically to the accompaniment of loud drumming. They also do a kind of miming befitting to and characteristic of the mythological characters they portray. Again, a few manuscripts of Oriya plays have been found which mention in their colophons that they were meant for Sahijatra. There are references of Sahijatra or Jatra in Oriya literary works of 16th century.

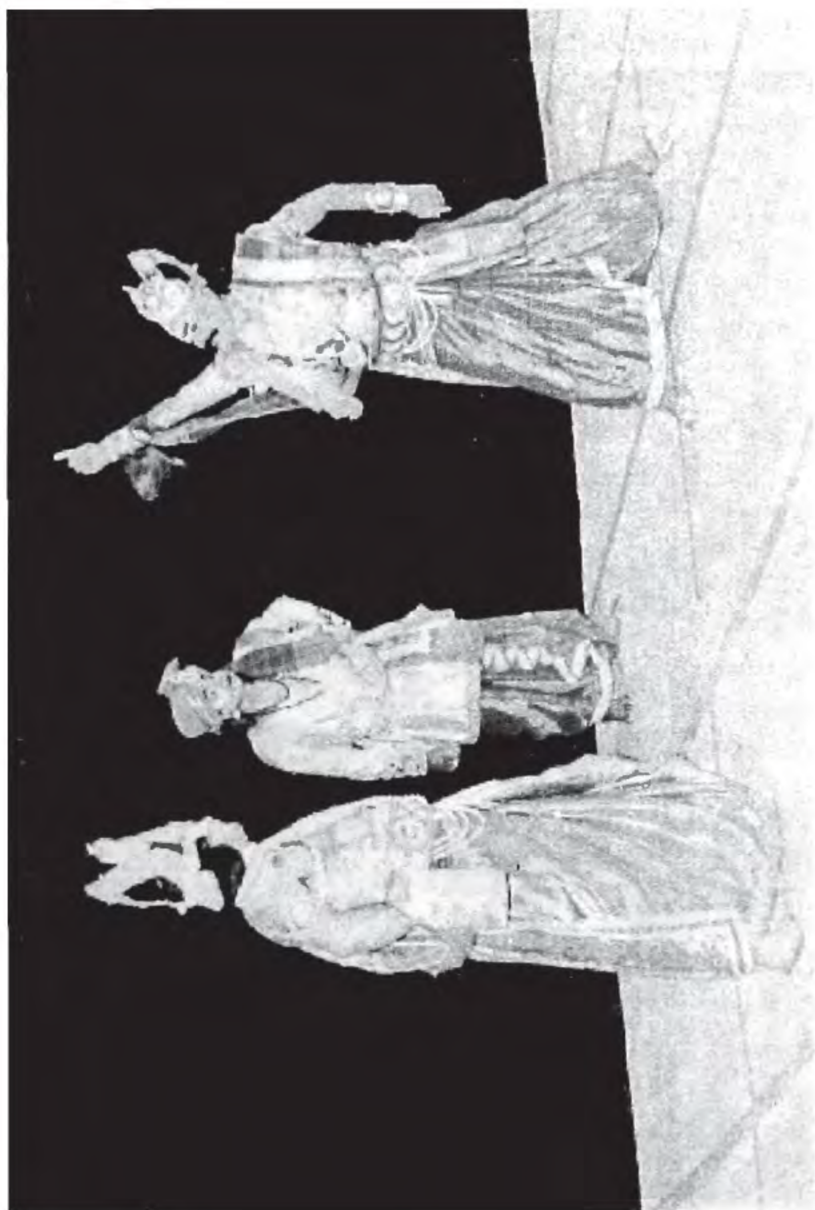
Prior to 12th century, entire Eastern India was the stronghold of Tantrism and Buddhism. Both had elaborate ritual ceremonies in the form of religious pageantry. The tantric tradition now survives in the Laai Haroubaa form of processional dance theatre in Manipur. In the famous Ratha Jaatra (Car Festival of Puri).

According to some it is a reformed Buddhist tradition; although the ritualistic character dominates, there are some unmistakably theatrical elements. The entire Eastern region, however, came under the strong influence of Vaisnavism from 12th century when Jayadeva wrote his immortal *Geetagovinda*. The dramatic presentation of *Geetagovinda* was so resoundingly successful that it not only revitalised the Sanskrit theatre tradition but greatly influenced all the language theatre traditions. Most probably under this influence some forms of Sahijatra gradually shed its processional character by imbibing the Sangeetaka style of presentation. Finally it became a sort of localised arena theatre and came to be called simply Jatra.

The theatre tradition lives with full vitality in Bengal and Orissa. In Manipur it has become somewhat feeble, having been eclipsed by the classical *Raasa* dances. The main difference between Bengali and Oriya Jatra is that while the former has become more declamatory than musical, the latter retains the influence of the Sangeetaka style of presentation by laying emphasis on singing and dancing.

Jatra is performed on a simple improvised stage. A squarish acting area with a long gangway joining the greenroom is all that is required for a Jatra performance. The acting area may be on level ground, but usually it is a raised platform. The audience sit all around except the gangway which is used for entry and exit of actors and also, at times, as a part of the acting area. For instance, at a particular dramatic situation when the acting area represents the inside of a palace, the gangway may represent a street near the palace and simultaneous acting may take place at these two different spatial levels.





The Jatra performance begins with a sort of musical overture, usually with three movements. The opening movement is more often based on classical evening ragas like Yaman, Bihag, Yaman Kalyan, Khamaj, etc. The second is faster in tempo and lighter in character. The concluding movement is a vigorous and short flourish. In Bengali Jatra, the play proper begins after the overture. In Oriya Jatra, however, after the musical prelude a boy or a group of boys comes to the acting area and begins a dance which may be considered as curtain raiser. Till five or six decades ago these dancers were *gotipuas* who performed classical Odissi dance.

A Jatra play is more often so structured that the entry of the first actor onto the stage is charged with intense drama. This sort of climactic beginning is perhaps a well planned device to arrest immediately and effectively the attention of the audience.

Themes for Jatra plays are generally taken from Puranic literatures or from local legends. Social and political themes have already started coming in, more in Bengali Jatra than in its Oriya counterpart. While the repertoire of Bengali Jatra abounds in legendary and social plays, that of Oriya Jatra is replete with Puranic plays. At present, however, Oriya Jatra has been unfortunately much influenced by the movies and social plays are more often performed by the professional groups.

The Jatra theatre has a fascinating stock character who appears in every play. His name is *Vivek*, meaning conscience in Bengali Jatra and *Niyati* (destiny) in Oriya Jatra. The dramatic function of this stock character is totally different from either the *Sutradhar* or the *Vidooshaka* of the traditional Sanskrit theatre. He is even more than or different from the amalgam of the said two stock characters. Dressed usually as a madman or a mendicant, he appears at crucial moments of the drama to externalise the internal

questioning and or conflict of the main characters. He moves freely in the dramatic space and time living simultaneously in present, past, and future. He seldom speaks, but sings. Therefore, he who plays the role of the stock character must be a consummate vocalist besides being a good actor.

The presentational style of Jatra is such a wonderful blending of *Naatyadharmi* (stylised) with *Lokadharmi* (realistic) that the resultant is highly theatrical. Just as it is desirable for a man to be humane, so also a theatre should be theatrical. This simple logic is not understood by those who blindly vote for only realism in theatre. It is, of course, no wonder that the realism inspired by the industrial civilisation would want the theatre to be stripped of its theatricality since the culture tends to turn a man into a machine and a work of art into commercial merchandise. The fascinating theatricality of Jatra however easily degenerates into something melodramatic in the hands of lesser talents. That kind of discerning sensibility which can clearly distinguish between the naked and the nude can only comprehend the difference between melodrama and robust theatricality.

Despite political independence, all aspects of genuine Indian culture have been gradually degenerating. The reason may be that Indian culture and various art traditions were the products of a highly developed agricultural civilisation. Now, industrial civilisation is making fast and deep inroads. As a result, traditional values have been uprooted. Even a sensitive and educated man of the present day society chooses to go to a movie rather than to a theatrical performance. Naturally, theatre is trying to be movie-like. As a result, many sloppy elements of the tinsel world are flowing into the Jatra theatre. Both in Bengal and in Orissa, the fascinating tradition is now so degenerated that it is no longer

Jatra, but its pathetic parody. Sensitive theatre directors like Sambhu Mitra, Utpal Dutta, etc. tried to rescue the tradition, but it could not be possible because no theatre can survive in a healthy way unless there is a sizable body of discerning and committed theatre-goers.

Performing Art Traditions of Orissa

No country has such a wide range and variety in performing art traditions as India has. Again, in this country, Orissa perhaps has the richest and the strongest traditions in performing arts. The State is proud of having at least two highly evolved art dance styles in Odissi and Chhau. There are around a dozen traditional theatre forms of which Jatra, Prahlad Natak and Śahijatra are more known. Orissa is the only state in which all the four styles of puppet theatre – glove, rod, string and shadow – traditions are still surviving. Of the four or five ballad singing traditions, the most unique are the Badipala and Daskathia. The tradition of Chhanda singing that admirably blends evolved music with sophisticated poetry is again unique. And it is in Orissa that the ancient Indian Moorchhana system of music continued up to 18th century with a distinctive rendering style of ragas which is evident from several treatises written in this region between 16th and 18th century. Some of them are now readily available in edited and printed form. Kerala is the only state which can claim similar range and variety in performing art traditions.

The Oriya culture as such, including the performing art traditions, has a distinctive character because of the fact that Orissa is geographically so situated that for centuries it enjoyed the status of being the meeting ground of the North and the South. The Vindhya Range divides Indian internally into two halves. The northern part, called *Uttarapatha*, owing to repeated invasions, developed a culture different from that of the *Dakshinapatha*, the southern part. The coastal plains of Orissa became a link between the two. Thus Orissa had the privilege of shaping its own culture integrating elements of both. It will not

be difficult to discern the synthesis if the various aspects of Orissan culture like music, dance, temple architecture, religious thinking etc. are carefully examined. A mere look at the Oriya script which has a rounded appearance suggests its similarity with these of the South Indian languages like Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil. A more careful examination will reveal that if the rounded upper part of an Oriya letter is substituted by a horizontal straight line, it will bear much similarity with the Devanagari. The art music tradition of Orissa is different from that of the Hindustani and Karnatic schools of music. While its raga system is closer to the Karnatic School, the tala, especially in the concept of jati, is closer to that of Hindustani.

The art music tradition of Orissa deserves to be discussed first, because it is getting more and more distorted and if urgent steps are not taken a glorious tradition, that enhances the richness of Indian music heritage, will soon be lost for ever.

The art music tradition of Orissa can be broadly divided into two: Raga music and Chhanda music. Raga music is believed to have developed in India towards the 7th century AD and the earliest treatise mentioning raga is Brihaddeshi of Matonga. Earlier to development of raga music there was Jati gayana or Prabandha gayana which followed the ancient Moorchhana system. When the concept of raga got fully developed it became a kind of melodic framework of particular notes. The framework allows different rendition styles. During the medieval period several rendition styles were prevalent of which two became more and more popular and they are now known as Hindusthani and Karnatic schools of music. Orissa had been maintaining its own rendition style till the first few decades of this century. It however started being heavily influenced by the Hindusthani School and

at present it has drifted so much away that the Odissi songs, especially which are sung as accompaniment to the Odissi dancers, sound either like a distorted thumri or like a film song set to a Hindusthani raga.

Conceptually, a raga is not confined to a particular style of rendering. There are however quite a few ragas which are conventionally identified with a style. For instance, Kafi and Khamaj, though rendered in Karnatic styles too, are considered as ragas of Hindusthani School. Similarly, such ragas as Hamsadhvani and Kalavati, which are now quite popular with Hindusthani musicians, are basically from the repertoire of Karnatic. In the past, such ragas as Kalingada and Shavari appear to have been taken from the repertoire of typical Odissi music. That Orissa had a very distinctive tradition in music is unmistakably proved by more than half a dozen musical treatise written between 16th and 18 century. Of these the most important is *Geetaprakash* written by Krishnadas Badajena Mohapatra in 16th century. Krishnadas was one of the respected musicians in the court of Akbar, which means he was a colleague of the celebrated and legendary Tansen. Abdul Fazl writes in Akbarnama that he was not only a great musician but a poet too in his own right. It is indeed a pity that the intelligentsia of Orissa has little idea about this great musician of Orissa. More unfortunate is that most of the present day Odissi musicians do not have anything to do with *Geetaprakash* which was considered as highly authoritative during 17th and 19 century in the whole of Eastern India.

As has already been said, the Chhanda music tradition peculiar to Orissa is unique. In this system there are a few ragas which have fixed metrical patterns. For instance, Bangalashree raga has

in its metrical pattern 20 matras divided in three Khandas of 6, 6 and 8. Bangalashree as chhanda is always sung in the same traditional way and the poems written in this matra have the prescribed number of matras in each of the three khandas. Most of the poems written in Orissa either in Sanskrit or in Oriya followed the Chhanda system, especially if the poetical work is a kavya. The astapadis of *Geetagovinda* by Jayadeva may be considered as the precursor. The Chhanda system however was fully crystallised by around 17th century.

Of the two evolved styles of dance while Odissi is a superb style of art dance excelling in sensuous lyricism, Chhau is a vibrant form of ballet, i.e. non-verbal form of dance theatre. Chhau is an extremely interesting tradition since it admirably blends elements of highly sophisticated art dance with that of folk and tribal dances. There are more then a dozen styles of dances, prevalent in Eastern India, which are called Chhau. Stylistically, Chhau traditions can be broadly divided into two styles which use mask and those who do not. Most evolved among these which do not use masks is Mayurbhanj style and among those which use masks is Saraikala. Although Saraikala is new in the state of Bihar, the Chhau prevalent there is unmistakably Orissan. Therefore, it will be worthwhile to revive the Chhau of Bonai, which closely followed the Saraikala style.

Chhau music has also a few fascinating features. For the melodic aspect, although it draws heavily upon the Jhumar singing tradition, many tunes have been inspired by either Odissi or Hindusthani raga music. The rhythmic aspect is not only fascinating but complicated too. In Chhau orchestra drums dominate. The *bol*s, the mnemonics, for the drum music is the symbols of sounds produced by three kinds of drums: *Dhol*,

Chaddhodi, and *Dhamsa*. The rhythmic patterns are invariably syncopatic and there is no *thoka*, that is, basic rhythmic pattern concept in Chhau music. The art of composing Chhau rhythmic patterns is a specialised one and deserves to be studied deeply and systematically. Otherwise, this art may also die out soon.

Orissa is perhaps next to Kerala in the richness of theatre traditions. In Koodiattam and Kathakali, the classical theatre tradition survives in Kerala, but in Orissa the Sengeetaka style of Sanskrit theatre has becomes extinct. The folk traditions such as Jatra, Suanga, Mugal Tamsa, Prahalad Nataka, Sahijatra, Desianata, Bandibotal and various kinds of leela plays etc. are still prevalent in rural Orissa.

As mentioned earlier, all the four kinds of puppet theatre still survive in Orissa. The hand or glove puppet tradition known as Kundhei Nacha and the red puppet tradition called Kathi Kundhei Nacha survive in the remote villages of Cuttack and Keonjhar district. The string puppets called Sakhi Kundhei are found at a few places in southern and central Orissa. The unique shadow theatre called Ravanachhaya survives in Dhenkanal. I have the satisfaction of discovering it in 1971 in a remote village named Odasa. The puppet theatre has now received so much enthusiastic patronage of the state government that it is now changing its stripes, it is becoming modern!

Like many regions of this country Orissa too has scores of differing traditions in folk and tribal dance and music. Thus the heritage of Orissa in performing arts is as rich as varied.

The question that however raises its silent head is: should the Oriyas now feel proud or ashamed? Proud for having inherited such a glorious heritage and ashamed for having neglected the

traditions for the last two centuries? Because of the negligence almost all the traditions have either declined much or acquired a kind of staleness due to stagnation. An ordinary, educated Oriya of today is either ignorant of or indifferent towards these traditions. The intelligentsia, who matters much in inspiring these traditions to continue in good health, now also suffers from a strong hangover of Western influence.

During this century the values have also undergone a good deal of change. These performing art traditions are the products of a highly evolved agricultural civilization. The tentacles of industrial civilisation have spread so much that its vibrations are felt even in the remotest villages. It is the Oriya intelligentsia that must now decide whether and how to continue the traditions in their best health or allow them to die peacefully. It will be extremely unfortunate if these beautiful traditions are transformed to become fascinating tourist material.

Traditional Performing Arts

Their Survival Today

The values of a particular civilisation may undergo some changes in the passage of time, but their basic character does not change unless there is a radical social change. All the performing art traditions of this country evolved and were nurtured in an agricultural civilisation and feudalistic social set-up. Today, the society is democratic and industrial civilisation has made deep inroads. As a result, our values have undergone a good deal of change. In fact, our uprooted values have not yet taken new roots. In such a confusing stage of affair we are unable to see the traditional performing arts from the right perspective. Therefore, the traditions are receiving a kind of treatment from the society which is not beneficial for their healthy survival.

The commercial movies and TV are influencing the taste in such a way that our traditional performing arts do not have much appeal for the general mass. In a democratic set-up an art form will find it hard to survive, let alone grow, if it does not have a sizable clientele. Popular art forms therefore flourish in a democratic society. Today, the kind of music and dance presented in commercial movies is very popular. That is why in the field of performing arts they are ruling the roost although connoisseurs consider them aesthetically very poor compared to our traditional music and dance, be they folk or classical. In cities, clientele for classical music and dance is slowly growing, but for the folk and more evolved traditions, there are not many takers. When Indian society was feudalistic, even at the time of British rule, the situation was different. The feudal lords were taking care to see

that refined aesthetic sensibilities were developed in their kinsfolk. Again, those forms of arts which were aesthetically satisfying but have less popular appeal, they were being duly patronised so that the traditions not only continue but also grew. Democratic governments are patronising such arts no doubt, but the patronage is invariably getting diluted when it reaches the beneficiary, because it usually lacks two things that the royal patronage had, and they are: commitment and quality control.

As examples, the cases of Mayurbhanj and Seraikela Chhau dances may be taken. Before the two princely states merged respectively with Orissa and Bihar, their rulers were not only extending enthusiastic patronage but their kinsfolk were participating in the dancing also. Particularly in Seraikela in the thirties of this century, some of the best dancers and choreographers were princes. Under the royal patronage both styles of Chhau flourished and were taken to the height of their aesthetic appeal. When the princely states were merged with the provinces the royal patronage was automatically withdrawn. The Govt. of Bihar soon established a school for the continuity of the tradition, but there was no patronage for the Mayurbhanj style of Chhau. A few ardent admirers of the dance with the help of a few dedicated dancers formed a kind of group and somehow continued the tradition. The group was named as Mayurbhanj Chhau Pratisthan, when, at the instance of Jawaharlal Nehru, it was given a paltry grant of five thousand rupees a year. The grant was later increased to ten thousand. With that amount only the annual festival of Chaitra parva could be observed. After about two decades the central Sangeet Nataka Akademi in the year 1968 granted the required amount for holding a training class for

young learners. Later the Orissa Govt. established a school, but it could not run smoothly. Recently the Central Akademi has taken some worthwhile steps for training of the basic dance movements involving leading gurus and young learners not only of Baripada, the capital town of erstwhile Mayurbhanj princely state, but also of several rural areas where the enthusiasm for the Chhau tradition is still strong. Despite all these efforts, the artistic quality of the Chhau dances is going down. Why?

The big question for its answer needs some plain-speaking. Since I began my in-depth study of Mayurbhanj Chhau as long back as its 1962 and have been closely watching it since then, I think I know the causes of the malady. I sum them up below:

1. Training in Chhau dance, as in many other dance styles is rigorous. Unless the trainees are disciplined and there is a perfect rapport between the guru and the trainees the end result will not be as desired. The kind of democratic society we have now in India, almost all are much aware about their rights but completely oblivious of their duties. Therefore, discipline is a far cry in such a social set-up. The right kind of guru-shishya relationship is not there because gurus are now far more money-minded.

2. The Chhau dancers have practically no future because the artistic taste of the majority of audience has been conditioned by the commercial movies. Even in the big cities where watching a classical dance or music has now become a fashion, there is no demand for a Chhau show because many have no idea about the dance style, and even if one has some idea, since it is not so fashionable one would prefer to sponsor or watch a Padma awardee to watching a Chhau performance. The connoisseurs would perhaps prefer a Chhau show, but their number is woefully

small. Mayurbhanj Chhau especially excels in group numbers. Therefore, to sponsor a Mayurbhanj Chhau troupe appears to a sponsoring agency more expensive than a solo classical dancer or singer.

3. All the kinds of media, be it print, or film, or electronic are extremely irresponsible so far as our performing arts are concerned. In a democratic society the media have a very important role to play. Unfortunately, in India they are art blind. For instance, a newspaper devotes more than one page to sports, but not even a column to the arts. And what is our culture in sports? India does not sometime get even a silver medal in the Olympics. They are totally impervious to the fact that so far as performing arts are concerned India is the only superpower. One can understand the indifference of the print media towards the traditional performing arts because most of the newspapers are controlled by industrialists and/or business houses. But what about the electronic media? The govt. of India owns them. Yet they are extremely negligent about the performing act traditions of this country or they hopelessly lack the required discernment. Although they are giants compared to the film industry, they have become its most faithful slave. The electronic media now serves either the film industry or the politicians in power, not the aesthetically rich performing art traditions.

4. The persons who are entrusted with the responsibility of supervising the training and the annual festival are either indifferent or are more interested to gain something financially rather than in the development of Chhau. While in Seraikela the supervisors are from the bureaucracy, in Mayurbhanj they are both from bureaucracy and elected office bearers. The latter kind

also indulges in petty politics. Both kinds usually do not have the right kind of artistic sensibilities required for the work of supervision. They too have no commitment to the cause of Chhau. As a result there is practically no quality control.

5. When Chhau was receiving royal patronage the dancers were getting the favours of the rulers. Better dancers were getting royal recognition in an informal way for which they were enjoying a kind of social status. Now they get nothing of the sort. Therefore, there is no incentive for a Chhau dancer.

6. The quality of musical accompaniment is now very poor, because the kind of musical instruments which are used in Chhau are so typical that there is little possibility of their being soloists. Therefore, they can not choose to be professional musicians. They have to be accompanists with Chhau dance throughout and what they earn playing for Chhau is so meager that they will starve fifteen days a month if they do not earn from some other sources. In such a situation proper training in music is out of the question.

There are also other minor problems. When all the problems that surround Chhau dances of Mayurbhanj and Seraikela are studied, it becomes clear that mere financial assistance is no patronage. Much more important is the social climate and a comprehensive support.

If the supporters of a performing art tradition do not have right kind of artistic sensibilities, a comprehensive support instead of rejuvenating may sound the death knell. As an example, let the case of Ravanachhaya, a rare form of shadow theatre tradition of Orissa, be taken. With a good deal of effort and sparing no pains we traced the sole traditional Ravanachhaya puppeteer in a remote village named Odasa the district of Dhenkanal. When

we found him he was one of the poorest in the village, a nobody. He was as much surprised as thrilled to learn that we had come all the way from Delhi to watch him perform Ravanachhaya. He told us that he had not performed it even once during the last three or four years because the villagers no longer invited him to perform. Earlier there was a belief that if Ravanachhaya was performed in the village at least once a year, the villagers would reap a good harvest. Now owing to the spread of science-oriented education the belief had almost melted away. For entertainment the villagers preferred a movie or a theatrical presentation to a performance of Ravanachhaya. Therefore, Kaathinanda Das, the puppeteer, had become so poor.

We were thrilled when we saw the performance. Kaathinada Das rose in the esteem of the villagers when they saw that we were filming the show and taking a lot of photographs of both the puppets and the puppeteer. The Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, not only arranged for the training of younger persons so that the tradition did not die with Kaathinanda, who was then about 70 years old, but also honoured him with its prestigious award. This perhaps shook the Orissa govt. out of their slumber and the Chief Minister decided to offer Ravanachhaya governmental patronage. He entrusted the responsibility of supervision to one of his close and trusted persons who is a theatre worker of doubtful sensibilities. With plentiful financial assistance from the govt. of Orissa he first wanted to modernise Ravanachhaya. To him the musical accompaniment with only a frame drum called khanjani and a pair of castanets called daskathi, appeared not only inadequate but totally out of date! He prescribed that the musical accompaniment should be provided by a harmonium, a violin, and a pair of tabla! He was

of the opinion that the traditional oil-fed lamp used to light up the screen was outdated and had to be substituted by an electric lamp (since electricity was now available at Odasa and neighbouring villages) or by a gas light. The narrator puppeteer should use a microphone so that he could be heard by an audience of more than five hundred people. But the death knell of Ravanachhaya was clearly heard when the said supervisor passed the judgment that the figures of the Ravanchhaya were crude! Therefore, they should be made following the style of the pothi chitras!

When we came to know about the kind of patronage the govt. of Orissa was proposing to extend to Ravanachhaya, we were shocked. The secretary of the Orissa Sangeet Nataka Akademi expressed his helplessness in checking the disastrous patronage since it had the blessing of the Chief Minister. Like a drowning man catching at a straw we remembered the village level worker who was persuaded to genuinely involve himself with the training programme sponsored by the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi. He was convinced that the modernisation progamme was suicidal. He was encouraged to maintain the traditional character of the shadow theatre. And meanwhile, if the Orissa govt. was insistent on the so- called modernisation a new group could be trained so that both the old and the new coexisted. This strategy worked, and the traditional Ravanachhaya still survives; the modernised version most probably died a premature death, thanks to the change of political set-up in Orissa. The new set-up is totally impervious to traditional arts. And it is a blessing in disguise.

The above case indicates that the survival of a tradition is not dependent on financial patronage alone. If the patronage is

not deeply appreciative of and adequately involved with the tradition it is quite close to the state of non-existent. Again, the quality and character of survival will depend upon social climate and general taste. As examples, the Jatra theatre traditions of West Bengal and Orissa may be taken. In both the States the theatre traditions are still prevalent with a lot of vigour and dynamism, of course with changed character.

The Jatra of Orissa has been basically operatic. The music of Jatra used to be a fascinating blend of classical Odissi and folk and impressively theatrical. The theatre form used to have elements of Odissi dance in sumptuous measure. The gotipua dancing was being nurtured by the Jatra theatre. The famous guru of Odissi dance Kelucharan Mahapatra was one of such gotipuas. With that kind of music and dance Jatra had an artistic character which was not much removed from a classical style. Now the kind of jatra that is extremely popular, especially in the rural and semi-urban areas of Orissa, has retained only the theatricality; but it is so influenced by the commercial movies that it appears like a three dimensional and live Oriya movie rather than a traditional Jatra performance. The question is: should we say Jatra of Orissa is continuing with full vitality? Of course, there are instances that a tradition changed its character completely and continued with equal or more artistic robustness. For example, Kathak was initially a highly mimetic art of story telling. During medieval period it changed its artistic character completely and became a style of classical dance. But in this case the level of aesthetic appeal was not lowered. In the case of Jatra of Orissa the artistic quality has been brought down in order to keep up its popularity.

The case of the Jatra of West Bengal is similar to some extent but with a slight difference. Talented contemporary theatre directors like Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutta, etc. used the Jatra presentation technique for their experimentation. This influenced, more or less the commercial Jatra theatre which is now so popular throughout West Bengal that tycoons have taken it over and feathered their nests richly. Despite the input of the gifted theatre directors, Jatra theatre of West Bengal has suffered artistically.

One of the most important factors that has created in the present period some confusion about desired aesthetic quality, especially in the field of dance and theatre, is the degree of importance of realism in art. In the traditional Indian aesthetics the main aim of art is to present the *loukika* (the reality) as *aloukika* (stylised). Therefore, the naatyadharmee (stylised) presentation was given more importance than lokadharmee (realistic). The word loka also creates some confusion, because in Hindi, as in some other Indian language, it means general people i.e. the folk. Therefore, folk theatre in Hindi is lokanaatya. In Sanskrit, loka is derived from the verbal root lok which means to see or to perceive. Therefore, lokadharmee literally means having the character of perceptual reality. In the field of arts lokadharmee means realistic representation. In such a style of presentation the loukika activities or feelings retain their realistic character in the performance. According to the Natya Shastra while lokadharmee presentation should be adopted in farcical and humorous performances, naatyadharmee should be preferred in serious presentations which aim at giving the audience a taste of aloukika. Some eminent thinkers of the West like Antonin Artaud, Brecht, etc. also hold similar opinion. The great Spanish painter Pablo Picasso defines art as a lie that makes us realise the truth.

Traditional Indian thinking is parallel to Picasso's, only the word lie is substituted by maya which is wrongly translated as illusion. Its correct translation would be relative truth. According to Indian thinkers, maya hides herself in five kanchukas (sheaths). They are: kaala (time), kalaa (art), vidyaa (education) as given in schools and colleges), niyati (destiny), and raaga (sentiments).

The reason behind giving realism less importance in art is that our reaction to a work of art is totally different from that of to a real thing. When we see a real thing we react instinctively, but when we see a work of art our reaction is more appreciative and contemplative in character. If, however, we see a snake made of plastic or rubber but exactly looking like a snake, initially the feeling of fear will be aroused which will be dispelled as soon as we realise that the snake is not real but an imitation. Then we admire how skillful is the imitation. The plastic snake, therefore, is a lokadharmee art. In the opinion of the Indian thinkers a genuine work of art should not at all arouse instinctive reaction. That is why they preferred stylisation to realism in arts. Abhinavagupta, the great aesthetician of 10th century, therefore, strongly advised not to take social themes for a play, lest the aloukika character of the representation should get diluted.

Predominance of realism in arts is an influence of the West. The kind of education we had during the British rule made us look down upon our own traditions. A strong conviction grew in us that all that is there in the West is superior to that of ours. The hangover is still there. As a result, realism in the field of art is considered by the majority of people in our country superior to the stylised non-realistic. Almost all art traditions of our country were basically stylised. When they are being continued some elements of realism are creeping in and that is distorting the form

of art more or less.

Another factor that is responsible for the distortions in our performing art traditions is the commercial cinema. It is a powerful medium of entertainment. Although it is basically an artistic medium, commercialisation transformed it into an industry. The commercial movies have such a tremendous popular appeal that an overwhelming majority of our people is influenced by them. Their taste is also, more or less, conditioned by these movies which are neither truly realistic nor stylised. For instance, the picturisation of a situation having a song is invariably done in such a way that is a mockery of realism. People are so much conditioned by such a distorted realism that if a lesser dancer or actor does that the general audience appreciate it fully. This is the reason why our surviving forms of performing art are acquiring cheaper elements for the sake of popularity.

Survival of a performing art tradition should not mean continuity in stagnation. Tradition is not an accumulation like a lake; it is a flow like a river. When a river flows several streams join as tributaries. They usually enrich the flow, but if the inflow is very much polluted it will befoul the flow. This is what also happens to a tradition. For any performing art tradition of India religion has been one of the most important tributaries. What is now known as Hindu religion is actually sanatana dharma which has many streams, such as, Tantrism, Shaivism, Shakti cult, Vaishnavism etc. Each of these streams has different emotional attributes. Therefore, influence of one stream on an art tradition inspires a stylistic trait which may change if another influences later. This has happened to almost all performing art traditions. For instance, the Odissi dance was initially influenced by Tantrism. At that time it was highly ritualistic. Nritta, i.e. the non-narrative

and abstract dancing dominated. Around the 7th century it was influenced by the Buddhist tantric cult. At that time expressional passages based on highly metaphysical poems written by the eminent sadhakas of the cult found way to the repertoire of the dance. In 12th century, when Jayadeva wrote the immortal *Geetagovinda* and Orissa came under the sway of Vaishnavism, the expressional passages were mostly based on poems steeped in Vaishnavism. Therefore, they became more lyrical and the metaphysical symbolism was in agreement with Vaishnavism. In 16th century, the Vaishnavism of Orissa underwent some changes with the advent of Shree Chaitanya to Puri. The expressional passages of the dance style again changed to accommodate the shift of emphasis in the Vaishnavism. All these stylistic changes enriched and enhanced the Odissi repertoire. The present day Odissi, especially its accompanying music is, more or less, influenced by the commercial cinema. This inflow is befouling the artistic quality. The situation was much worse in the 1950s, towards the later part of which all the leading gurus and scholars gathered to cleanse the dance style of the degenerating elements and to restore its classical style. At the time of this revival the accompanying music was not unfortunately taken into consideration. They limited themselves to the authenticity of dance movements and the repertoire. The aspect of music now needs that kind of cleansing. The survival of a tradition will be really meaningful if regains its lost artistic excellence.

Because of the political and social upheaval, from around 17th century up to middle of 20th century, practice of performing arts, especially dance, was being considered not quite respectable. As a result, almost all the performing art traditions, owing to the social neglect and disrespect, suffered from degeneration. After

our independence when we wanted to revive our rich traditions of performing arts, most of them were more or less in a state of degeneration. They needed, and some now also need, cleansing and upliftment for meaningful survival and continuity. There are, however, many who would strongly dislike any kind of change in the tradition. Such conservative outlook may do more harm than good to the traditions. Of course, before trying to do any restoration work, the tradition has to be studied in-depth and from all angles. Leading performers and scholars who are genuinely committed to the tradition most agree to put their brains together to do the restoration work. No doubt, it is an enormous job and easier said than done, but this is the right way to preserve our rich heritage in the field of performing arts.

In this connection, the importance of proper documentation can never be ignored. Fortunately, the technology is so advanced that to well document a performing art tradition is no longer a problem. But our assets and our liabilities are the vastness of our country and the amazing range and variety of our performing art traditions.

Indian Folk Theatre

India has an extremely rich and varied theatre tradition. The vast body of traditional theatre is basically classified into folk and classical. This dichotomy is not relevant to Indian theatre and dance. There are quite a few theatre styles, which has almost all the qualities of a so-called classical theatre. For instance, Krishnaattam of Kerala and Raasleela of Uttar Pradesh are highly developed forms of theatre. The singing of the padas of Raasleelaa is like the Dhrupad singing. Krishnaattam is the precursor of Kathakali. Although Kathakali is actually a form of theatre, it is being regarded as a form of classical dance. Each Kathakali play has a definite plot and development of characters. It may be a form of dance from the Western perspective. Dancing in Kathakali is one of the kinds of dramatic expression, what Brecht says 'choreographic acting'. In India theatre could never be conceived without elements of music and dance. We call theatre *natya* that is derived from the verbal root of *nat*, which means 'to dance'. The only surviving classical Sanskrit theatre is *Kutiyaattam*, which has almost all the aspects of Kathakali. Most of the theatre styles, which are being classified under the folk category, have elements of dance and music and have been inspired by the concept of *natya*, the Sanskrit theatre.

Nowadays all the serious theatre thinkers of the West prefer *Total Theatre* to dialogue- centred realistic theatre. The total theatre has elements of poetry, music, dance etc. and most of our theatre styles are, in a sense, Total Theatre. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to classify them as Traditional Language Theatre rather than Folk theatre.

In ancient India Sanskrit was the *rastrabhasha*, that is, the lingua franca of this country. All our great plays written till 16th century are in Sanskrit. When regional languages were fully developed, Sanskrit started receding from the common man. Therefore, theatre forms of various styles began evolving using different regional languages, but their model was Sanskrit theatre. That is why the language theatre forms have elements of dance and music and they are, more or less, stylized theatre forms.

Another interesting aspect of our language theatre forms is the stylised make-up and costumes. The language theatre forms prevalent, especially in the southern part of our country, use highly stylised make-up and costume. The Yakshgana of Karnataka, Therukonthu of Tamil Nadu, Mudiettu, Teyyam, and Padaayani of Kerala, and Prahlad Natak of Orissa use highly stylised make-up and costumes. In the Teyyam theatre of Kerala the actor's face is treated with bright colours to give it a mask-like appearance and some of the actors wear such huge headgears that go up to 30 feet. To keep the headgear upright a stagehand props it up with a bamboo pole. In Krishnaattam many characters wear highly stylised make-up and about eight of the characters wear wooden masks.

There is an aesthetic reason for such stylised make-up and costumes. It is to prevent the audience from identifying with the portrayed characters. Brecht, the great German playwright and theatre thinker, who has profoundly influenced theatre persons all over the world, suggests emphatically that the audience must be *alienated* from the portrayed characters on the stage so that he or she is dissuaded form any kind of identification with dramatis personae. If any of the audience identifies himself or herself with any of the portrayed characters of the stage then he or she

will have almost the same kind of mental state of the character, which will cloud the faculty of judgment. As a result, the onlooker will not clearly comprehend the moral of the theatrical presentation. The highly stylised make-up and costumes used in many of our language theatre forms are precisely devices for Brechtian 'alienation'.

Music is the life breath of many of our language theatre forms. The theatre music admirably blends folk with classical. Some of the highly musical language theatres are Kuchipudi theatre of Andhra Pradesh, Raasleelas and Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh, Tamaashaa of Maharashtra, Jatra theatre of Orissa and Bengal, Ankianaat of Assam, Bhavaai of Gujarat, Khyaal of Rajasathan and Maach of Madhyapradesh.

In some of our language theatre forms the drum music is as powerful as dramatic. In Kathakali, the drum called chende wonderfully enhances the dramatic as well as the aesthetic quality. When a character is dreaming, the chende will be playing so softly and lyrically that the sound of the drum music magnificently suggests dreaming; if, however, there is a fight between two characters, the chende will be played with such a fury that the intensity of the scene will be many times enhanced. The drum called nakkaaraa is equally eloquent in Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh, Swaang of Haryana, and Khyaal of Rajasthan. These three theatre forms have similarities for which some scholars are of opinion that once upon a time they belonged to a theatre style called Swaang which might have been inspired by the Sangeetaka kind of uparoopaka of Sanskrit theatre.

Almost all the language theatre forms are not realistic and dialogue-centred. They are deliberately theatrical and the dramatic situations are much larger. In quite a few language theatre forms,

at times, dialogues are delivered in the form of songs. There is also very often exaggeration in expressing emotions, which may appear melodramatic, but that is the vitality of the theatre forms. The exaggeration is deliberately aimed at heightening the theatricality. Those who are for realistic theatre they may dislike the theatricality, but those who are for stylised theatre, they say that a theatre should be theatrical, because that is its character.

All these language theatre forms are basically arena theatres. They will appear incongruous on a proscenium stage. Some forms of like Maach of Madhya Pradesh erect a two or three tiered stage and simultaneous acting may be presented in two tiers. The Maach stage is also not like a proscenium stage.

Although our traditional language theatre forms as per their original style are aesthetically so satisfying, it is unfortunate that quite a few forms like Jatra of Bengal and Orissa, Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh are being much influenced by the commercial films and as a result losing much of their aesthetic appeal. They are imitating commercial films obviously for popular appeal. Unless they get a sizeable clientele who will dislike the cheap elements of commercial films, they will go on deteriorating and totally lose their delectable aesthetic character.

Prahlad Natak

This is a highly stylised theatre prevalent in the Ganjam district of southern Orissa. The tradition is not very old. Towards the later part of 19th century, Raja Ramakrushna Chhotaray, an Oriya feudatory ruler of Jalantar state, now annexed to Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh, conceived the first performatory form of Prahlad Natak. The first play was written by Gopinath

Parichha, a poet and playwright who received generous patronage from the ruler. As a gesture of gratitude the playwright not only dedicated the work to the ruler but also ascribed its authorship to him. Within a few years of its birth, Prahlad Natak became so popular that the rulers of neighbouring princely states were inspired to write or to get written other versions of Prahlad Natak. No matter which version, the plot remains the same, based on the myth of Narsimha avatar, the man lion incarnation of Vishnu.

The similarities of make-up and costumes suggest that it was inspired by Therukoothu of Tamiladu and Veethi Natakam of Andhra Pradesh but the performance style is much similar to the Jatra of Orissa.

Prahlad Natak has only one play in its repertoire. It is also an arena theatre, presented in the open air and on level ground, but a must for the performance is a five or six tiered wooden platform some six feet high. The top of the platform has an area of about six feet by four on which is placed the throne of Hiranyakashipu, the demon whom the man-lion incarnation of Vishnu kills at the end. The platform is usually collapsible and easily erected before and dismantled after a show. An area of about thirty feet square is the acting area that is enclosed with ropes in front of the platform. To the left about twenty feet from the platform is made a hollow structure representing the pillar Hiranyakashipu smote. The accompanying musicians take their places to the right of the acting area close to the platform. The orchestra usually comprises three instruments - a harmonium, a two-faced drum called mardal, like that accompanies with Odissi dance, and gini (a pair of small cymbals). A few groups have now started using violin and trumpet, adding a touch of glamour but they actually enhance the aesthetic appeal of the music.

Music is the life breath of Prahlad Natak. It not only provides the base but also determines the dramatic structure. Both vocal and instrumental music at appropriate places intensify the dramatic effect. Dialogues winged with music take the emotive intent farther than realistic delivery. Prahlad Natak draws heavily upon the traditional Odissi music that has a distinctive character of its own. Since music dominates Prahlad Natak, the director (also the conductor) must be a good vocalist who has to memorise all the songs of the play. More often than not, the director himself acts as the leading vocalist called gaahaka, derived from the Sanskrit word gaayaka that means a singer. The gaahaka is not the leader of the chorus, but he acts also as the interpreter, commentator, and the conductor of the orchestra. Although usually he does not wear any make-up or costume, he has specific songs and dialogues. He sings eulogies of gods, narrates events preceding a dramatic situation just before it is presented and also events pertinent to the plot but not enacted. At times, it is the gaahaka who speaks the asides of a character and comments on his or her mood and thoughts. He is entrusted with the responsibility of explaining to lay spectators the cryptic, pithy dialogues. The role of the gaahaka is somewhat similar or even more than that of a sutradhar of Sanskrit plays.

Although songs predominate there are also long prose passages, besides prose dialogues linking the sung passages. The role of Hiranyakashipu the demon is the most demanding. The way he goes up and down the tiered platform with vigorous dance-like movements is indeed a treat for the eyes. A professional actor who excels in this role is at times hired by more than one group. Though Narasimha appears only in the last climactic scene and is seen on stage for only about a quarter of an hour his again is a

difficult role. The actor playing, Narasimha fasts on the day of the performance. Putting on the lion mask and tapered nails, simulating claws he stands amazingly transformed. It is said that years ago an actor played the role with such complete identification that he actually killed the actor playing Hiranyakashipu. Apocryphal or true, the custom exists of tying a rope around the waist of Narasimha, the rope held by two or three stage hands who must avert a killing should the spirit of Narasimha take charge. The choice of an actor for the role is made with much care. In some villages such as Bokagaon near Chhatrapur the mask is worshipped in a temple and is believed to have divine powers.

Hiranyakashipu's face is painted bright red. His moustache is thick ropes of black thread twined with golden threads of zari and runs across the full expanse of the cheeks down to the nape of the neck where it is tied in a knot. Both Hiranyakashipu and Prahlad wear magnificently crafted headgears and colourful skirts. The major male characters wear shoulder decorations. Apart from the female and the minor characters, all are costumed in such an exaggerated manner that they seem masked, head to foot. In keeping with the stylsied make-up and costume, the acting is choreographic in character, with a high dose of song and dance.

Prahlad Natak is so popular in the district of Ganjam that there are now more than thirty groups. All the groups are not equally good. But to watch the performance of Prahlad Natak presented by a really good group is an unforgettable experience. Tuneful music, dramatic dance, stylised mime, poetry, spectacle, colourful costumes, and sumptuous decorations. All combine to induce a state of consciousness between wakefulness and dream. Refusing the trip, the literal-minded are likely to be bored or dazed at the end of the show.

Prahlad Natak - a Theatre of Liberated Reality

There are many planes of reality. The vibhava world presented by a natyadharmi performance reflects a place of reality quite different from the one we perceive when awake. Dreams or myths reflect yet other planes of reality. Ancient mystic seers of India have indicated that there are four basic levels of perception and each presents a different aspect of the total reality. If the third to seventh terse slokas of the Mandukya Upanishad is carefully examined the four levels of perception will be clear. According to the Upanishad, it is the awareness (cetana or prajna) that makes the sense organs functional. At different mental states the character of awareness becomes different. As a result the quality and degree of perceptivity of the sense organs change from one level to another. The mental state when we are wide awake has been designated by the Upanishad as jagaritasthana. At this state the awareness is objective and it goes outward to feel and enjoy the gross objects. It is named as vaisvanara, the literal meaning of which is the universal male, because this awareness inseminates the existence to produce other levels. The second state is svapnasthana, i.e. when one is dreaming. The awareness at this state is subjective and it goes inward to feel and enjoy the subtle objects. It is named as taijasa, meaning the Luminous Mind. The third is the susuptasthana, i.e. the state of perfect slumber when one neither dreams nor yearns with any desire. The awareness here is omnijective, since it is both inward and outward simultaneously. The awareness of this state is called prajna, which means the Lord of Wisdom. The fourth state has no name. It may only be called Turiya (the Fourth). The awareness of this state is (if I am permitted to coin a new word) transjective. It is

Atma, the total self, the object of all knowledge.

The reality of the fourth state is totally unmasked. At the jagaritasthana, i.e., the first state, the perceived reality has many layers of masks. The layers are much less at the second. And at the third, there clings to the reality still a layer of pliant mask. Imagine a face with five layers of mask on it. If two or three of the layers are removed, the face will surely feel partially liberated. That kind of liberated reality is reflected by Prahlad Natak, a fascinating form of theatre prevalent in Orissa.

In fact, all the stylised forms of Indian traditional theatre reflect the reality of a mental state that is somewhere between jagarita and svapna sthanas. At the time of great dramatic intensity or when the performance is most poetically charged, the state moves up to touch the susuptasthan.

The first time I watched a Prahlad Natak performance I deliberately uprooted myself from the workaday reality and surrendered my awareness to the performance. I could not take my eyes off the demon. Although fearsome, ruthless and proud, he was a riot of colour – and very mysterious. When he spoke, it was as though thunder has forsaken its voice and chosen the song-bird's lilt. And finally he started chasing murderously his son – a sweet flowerlike boy of around twelve years of age. The chase was not really one running after the other. It was leisurely, deliberate, dance-like, and far more exciting. To me it appeared as if a colourful and languid tornado was trying to grab at an agile rainbow that was receding in the sky, rippling and singing. Towards the end of the chase the demon and his son came near a pillar-like structure. Addressing his son the demon roared, "If your god is omnipresent, is he then inside this pillar?" "Sure. I

have no doubt about it," confidently replied the boy. The incensed demon with all his pride and might kicked the pillarlike structure. From the debris arose, thunderously roaring, gloriously-maned, a being, half man, half lion. Just as a brightly burning candle becomes insignificant before the sun, so was the demon before this man-lion who easily defeated and killed him by ripping open his abdomen with his claws.

That was the climactic scene of Prahlad Natak, the traditional theatre prevalent in the southern part of Orissa, especially in the district of Ganjam. There are now just around half a dozen groups performing Prahlad Natak. This form of theatre has only one play in its repertoire. Of course, performance of one group differs from others in the use of spoken words, songs, etc. but the theme remains the same. Theatre forms having one-play-repertoire are not uncommon in India. The multiform Ramalila of North India, Krisnattam and Mudiettu of Kerala, Krsnaparijat and Sangyabalya of Karnataka and Dasavatar of Goa, are some of the major forms which belong to this category. One wonders what really is so abiding in such forms of theatre that the same play performed countless times over hundreds of years does not lose any of its appeal nor becomes out of date. Many of these plays judged from the literary point of view, are not impressive and are often loosely structured. Reading the text of the play one can hardly imagine what the performance will be like. In Indian theatre tradition there is always a gap between the structure of the play and that of the performance.

Raja Ramakrusna Chhotray, an Oriyan feudatory ruler of Jalantar estate now annexed to Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh, is credited to have conceived first the performance format of Prahlad Natak about hundred years ago. The first play was

written by Gopinath Parichha, a poet and playwright who received generous patronage from the Raja. As a gesture of gratitude the playwright not only dedicated the work to the Raja but ascribed its authorship also to him. The manuscript of this original play was collected in 1938 by the Madras Oriental Manuscript Library and now it has been published by Cultural Affairs Department, Govt. of Orissa.

Within a few years of its birth, Prahlad Natak became so popular that other Rajas of neighbouring estates, such as Padmanabha Deo of Parlakhemundi, Kishor Chandra Harichandan of Surangi, and Ramachandra Sur Deo of Tarala, were inspired to write other version of the play. It is not known whether the Rajas themselves really wrote the versions or had them written by posts and playwrights patronised by them. Some of these versions were also published years ago. The original play and its later versions, all abound in songs, interspersed by prose dialogues. There are more than a hundred songs which different characters sing during the performance making Prahald Natak highly operatic in character.

The songs and spoken words may differ from one version of the play to another, but plot remains the same, based on the myth relating to Nrsimha avatar, the man-lion incarnation of Visnu.

In order to understand the poetic and metaphysical aspects of Prahlad Natak it is necessary to know what an avatar means. According to Hindu philosophy, the universe is created by and is part of Brahman, the supreme deity, conceived also as a state of nothingness containing all. This sounds paradoxical, but can be explained logically in an age when quantum mechanics has demonstrated that an electron behaves both as particle and as wave. The new physics has proved that the dichotomy of

subjectivity and objectivity is irrelevant to its ends and coined the terms 'omnijectivity'. From the omnijective point of view Brahman is at the same time nothingness and everythingness. When the former aspect of Brahman's nature is considered, the material universe is a vast illusion. The latter aspect entails manifestation, which has three basic functions - creation, sustenance and dissolution. In Hindu mythology, the cosmic forces or powers responsible for these functions are, respectively, Brahma, Visnu and Mahesvara. The created are sustained by their observance of particular codes, divinely ordained. This discipline is dharma, a word from the root *dhir* - to hold. But humans defile and debase their dharma after a length of time, making the task of Visnu, the preserver, difficult. When debasement is rampant and the task of sustenance is in jeopardy, Visnu descends to the terrestrial plane to work for the restoration of dharma, taking a suitable form. The act of descent, in Sanskrit, is avatarana. And avatar is the form that the descended power takes. According to Hindu mythology, from the beginnings of creation, Visnu has taken ten avatar forms of Mina (fish), Kacchapa (tortoise), Varsha (wild boar), Nraimha (man-lion), Vamana (dwarf), Parasurama, Rama, Balarama, Buddha and Kalki. (All these avatars, except Buddha, are mythical). But while Buddha is accepted as an avatar of Visnu in Orissa, in some other parts of the country he is replaced by Krishna. There is a myth for each of the avatars and the one about Nrsimha, which is relevant here, is as follows:

Hiranakaya (Golden-eye) and Hiranyakasipu (Golden-attired) were twins. The former demon was dragging the earth to the depths of the ocean, for which he was killed by Visnu as Varaha avatar (in the form of a wild boar). At the death of his brother, Hiranyakasipu was overcome with rage and grief and promised

to avenge. To acquire the power to defeat Visnu, he began severe austerities that finally won from Brahma the boon Hiranyakasipu sought – he could not be killed in day-time or at night, by a hand-held weapon or a missile, inside or outside a house, no man or god or demon could ever take his life. Hiranyakasipu thought he was invincible and none, not even Visnu, could kill him. He became the worst tyrant the earth had ever seen, declaring himself omnipotent. That he was omnipotent was accepted by all but his son of tender years, Prahlad, an ardent devotee of Visnu. The enraged Father tortured Prahlad a in various ways, but the boy remained steadfast in his belief that only Visnu was omnipotent, no one else, and omnipresent. Contending with his son, Hiranyakasipu one day demanded if Visnu was present within one of the two pillars at the threshold of the house. When Prahlad a, infinitely confident, declared that Visnu was everywhere, within the pillar as without, Hiranyakasipu in his fury kicked the pillar so violently that it broke. To avenge Prahlad a, and to vindicate his own offended majesty, Visnu emerged from the pillar, in a form of half-man, half-lion – Nrsimha – and tore the arrogant demon to pieces. The slaying of Hiranyakasipu did not invalidate the boon granted him. It occurred at dusk – neither night nor day; claws are no weapon; a threshold is neither inside nor outside a house; the being that killed Hiranyakasipu was no man or god or demon but a combination of man and beast.

Scholars intent on finding traces of history in myth have assumed that the one narrated above was created by the Vaisnavas to demonstrate their supremacy over the Saivas since Hiranyakasipu, the myth says, was a devout Saiva. There might be some truth here, but such an assumption tends to ignore the metaphysical and poetic aspects of the myth. It is perhaps more

rewarding to consider how the Nrsimha avatar myth has been acting on the minds of men down the ages than to speculate on the intentions of the myth-makers. Prahlad Natak performers, at any rate, hold Visnu and Siva in equal divine regard.

The Nrismha myth has inspired other forms of Indian traditional theatre too, such as Bhagavat Mela Natak and Terukutu of Tamil Nadu, Kuchipudi and Vithi Natakam of Andhra Pradesh. In the repertoires of these folk forms, plays based on the Nrismha myth find a significant place, especially in Bhagavata Mela, traditionally performed every year on Nrsimha chaturdasi - the day, according to the lunar calendar, on which Nrsimha putatively appeared. But Prahlad Natak is the only form of theatre which has no play in its repertoire but that on the Nrsimha theme.

A realistic theatre is perhaps inadequate to handle such a theme; a stylised one may, on the other hand, bring out the myth's nuances. The forms of traditional theatre mentioned above are all highly stylised and therefore not unequal to the demands of the theme. The stylisation scheme of one form differs, of course, from that of the others, acting style, make-up and costume are thus very dissimilar. In Indian theatrical tradition make-up and costume are regarded as aspects of the art of acting, and are jointly known as aharyabhinaya. Literally, aharya means 'accessory', and abhinaya 'carrying something in an intense manner'. According to Indian aesthetics, that which is carried by abhinaya is rasa, literally juice, which denotes aesthetic relish. Aharyabhinaa receives so much attention in some of the forms of Indian traditional theatre, especially those which are closer to the Sanskrit dramatic tradition, because it is believed that the character portrayed is revealed by the actor as much by dialogue

(vacikabhinaya) and gesture (angikabhinaya) as by make-up and costume (aharyabhinaya). Of the forms of traditional theatre which have in their repertoires plays based on the Nrsimha theme, Prahlad Natak and Terukutu have the most stylised aharyabhinaya. The latter form, evolved much earlier, is likely to have influenced the former in this respect. Although there are many dissimilarities, both use heavy and suggestive facial make-up for the male characters and rather realistic light make-up for the female. Again, male characters in both forms wear on their shoulders wing-like decorations and of all the major characters only Nrsimha wears a mask.

Hiraynayakasipu's face, in Prahlad Natak, is painted bright red. His mustache is thick ropes of black thread twined with zari (gold thread), and it runs across the full expense of the cheeks down to the nape of the neck, where it is tied in a knot. Similar moustaches are worn by actors in Yaksagan, an equally stylised traditional theatre of Karnataka. Hiranyakasipu and Prahlad both wear large and magnificently crafted headgears. The major male characters wear shoulder decorations as in Terukutu, Vithi Nataka and Yaksagan. Hiranyakasipu and Prahlad both wear colourful skirts. Apart from the female and minor characters all are costumed in such an exaggerated manner that they seem masked head and foot. In keeping with the stylised aharyabhinaya, the acting is choreographic in character, with a high dose of song and dance. Watching a performance, I felt exposed to a masked reality; the show over, I wondered if my everyday reality were masked instead.

Peter Brook, the renowned director, said in a recent interview that putting on a mask imparts the most extraordinary sense of liberation. According to him, when a mask is put on, it is a great

moment, to suddenly find oneself immediately for a certain time liberated from one's own subjectivity. And the awakening of body awareness is immediately there with it. He also believes "the traditional mask in essence isn't a mask at all, because it is an image of the essential nature. In other words, a traditional mask is a portrait of a man without a mask." This apparent paradox becomes clear when he says:

"I think it has now become an almost universally accepted cliché that we all wear masks all the time; but the moment one accepts that as being true, and brings to ask oneself questions about it, one sees that the usual facial expression either conceals (so it is a mask in that sense) that it's not in tune with what is really going on inside, or it is a decorated account; it presents the inner process in a more flattering or attractive light; it gives a lying version."

The reality of everyday life – taken for granted – is then a masked reality. If the masks are removed and the actors liberated, the enactment may not look quite unlike Prahlad Natak. What seems unrealistic in the theatre may in fact be regarded as liberated reality, which is closer to dream.

Music is the life-breath of Prahlad Natak. It not only provides the base but also determines the dramatic structure. Both vocal and instrumental music is used at appropriate places to intensify the dramatic effect. The percussive music helps the abhinaya to acquire a choreographic character. Dialogues winged with music take the emotive intent farther than realistic delivery. Complex emotions which cannot be verbalised are adequately and admirably communicated through music. Prahlad Natak draws heavily upon the traditional music of Orissa which, though influenced by both

the Karnatic and Hindustani systems of music, has a distinctive character all its own. Between the 16th and late 18th century half a dozen treatises on music were written in Orissa. A careful study of these indicates that the Moorcchana system of classification of melodic types, prevalent at the time of the Natyasastra (circa second century AD) but discarded later by the two major systems of music, was followed in Orissa till the late eighteenth century.

The Chhanda tradition of Orissa is another fascinating and distinctive aspect of Odissi music. Since the songs sung in Prahlad Natak are often in Chhanda pattern, it is necessary to discuss it here briefly. The major poetic works in Oriya, written between the sixteenth century and the third decade of the twentieth, are in chhanda style, meant primarily to be sung. Chhanda, derived from the root chhand, means rhythm. Basically, it is a metrical pattern. Most of medieval Oriya poetry was written in the Kavya style. A Kavya is a long narrative poem, often fiction in verse. In Oriya Kavyas each canto, usually, is composed in a different metre or Chhanda. Each pattern is named after a raga. At times, along with the raga the tala (rhythmic pattern) in specified. Some of the Chhandas, such as Kalahamsa Kedar (each line of twelve beats), have simple metrical patterns. Others like Chokhi are complicated. But each Chhanda has a specified traditional tune to which it is sung. This tradition was followed by Jayadeva when he wrote his famous *Geetagovinda* in the twelfth century - he has specified for every astapadi (a section of eight couplets) a particular raga and tala. The names of a few Chhandas, such as Asadhasuklavani, do not indicate a raga although the Chhandas are sung to specified traditional tunes. These names may have

belonged to ragas which went out of use in Orissa long before the sixteenth century, recalled only by the Chhanda literary tradition. The tunes of the Chhandas are simpler than the higher forms of Odissi music but equally appealing. Even now, in rural Orissa, illiterate villagers sing popular Chhandas of high literary merit, even though they do not follow the words. One may say they are content with the sounds of the words and do not look for the meanings.

Since music dominates Prahlad Natak, the director (also the conductor) must be a good vocalist who knows and can sing all the songs in the play. More often than not, the director himself acts as gahaka (from the Sanskrit gayaka - singer) not quite a character in the drama, yet the pivot on which the performance turns. Primarily, the gahaka is the leader of the chorus, but also acts as interpreter, commentator and conductor. Although, usually, the gahaka does not wear any specified costume or make-up, he has specific songs and dialogues. He sings eulogies of gods, narrates events preceding a dramatic situation just before it is presented – events pertinent to the plot but not enacted. At times, it is the gahaka who speaks the asides of a character and comments on his or her mood and thoughts. He is entrusted with the responsibility of explaining to lay spectators the cryptic, pithy dialogues. The gahaka's role runs more or less parallel to that of the sutradhar of the Ankianat (bhavana) theatre of Assam, but the sutradhar appears on the stage and has a specific costume and make-up.

Prahlad Natak, like many other forms of traditional theatre in India, is not performed in a hall but in the open air and on level ground. The performance is on a five or six tiered wooden platform some six feet high. The top of the platform has an area





of about six feet by four, on which the throne of Hiranyakasipu is placed. The platform is usually collapsible and easily erected before and dismantled after a show. An area of about thirty feet square, or even less – the acting area – is enclosed with ropes in front of the platform. To the left, twenty feet from the platform, a hollow structure representing the pillar Hiranyakasipu smote is kept. The musicians, let by the gahaka, take their places to the right of the acting area, close to the platform. The orchestra usually comprises three instruments – a harmonium, pakhawaj (a drum with two faces, also called mardala) and gini (a pair of small cymbals). A few groups have now started using instruments like the violin and trumpet, adding a touch of glamour to their orchestra, but these exotics do not enhance the appeal of the music.

A performance of Prahlad Natak begins with an invocation, Ganesa vandana, whereby the elephant-headed god Ganesa (literally, God of the Masses) is eulogized. Many other traditional Indian theatre performances begin with the Ganesa vandana too, since it is believed that the god removes all obstacles, especially those hindering aesthetic enjoyment. The vandana is sung by the chorus led by the gahaka, who then tells the audience he will soon present the play and, in advance, begs the audience to pardon any inadvertent mistake. He proceeds to tell he story. The curiosity of the spectators is not dampened but aroused by this; most of them know the story anyway, based as it is on a popular myth.

These preliminaries over, the play proper begins, each sequence announced with a flourish of the orchestra. The dialogues are often sung, the refrain taken up by the chorus. After each passage the drum breaks forth, and to the varied percussive pattern, the actor executes dance-like movements. Singing is taken

up again at the end of the dance passage. The virile and vigorous dance of Hiranyakasipu, especially on the steps of the tiered platform, is a treat to the eyes. In contrast, Prahlad a, played by a boy between nine and twelve years of age, dances with lyrical grace. Apart from a few minor characters, all sing and dance; versatility therefore is a must for a Prahlad Natak actor. As in many other traditional dramatic forms of India, female characters are played by male actors.

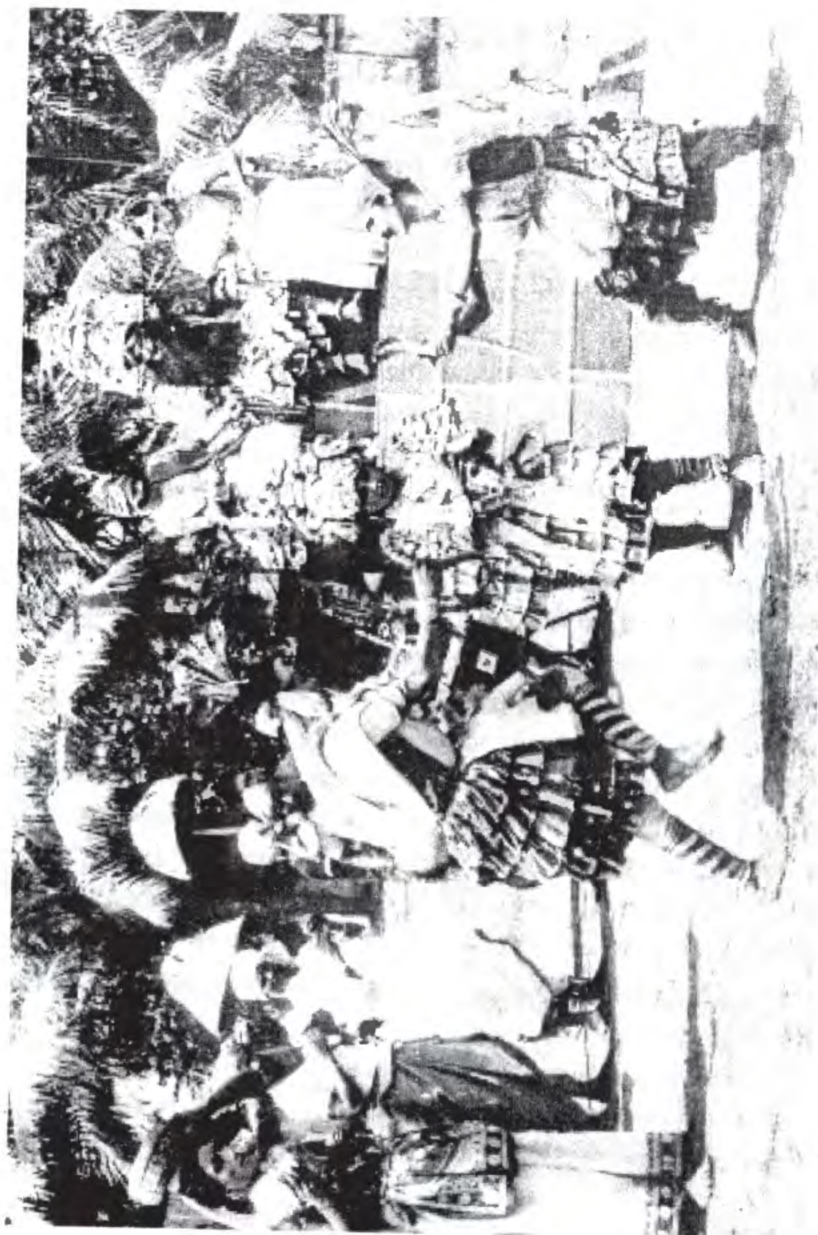
Although song predominates, there are also long prose passages, besides prose dialogues linking the sung passages. The role of Hiranyakasipu is the most demanding and professional actors for the role are hired by many groups. Though Nrsimha appears only in the last, climactic, scene and is seen on stage for only about a quarter of an hour, his is again a difficult role. The actor playing Nrsimha usually fasts on the day of performance. Putting on the lion mask and tapered nails, simulating claws, he stands amazingly transformed. It is said that years ago an actor playing the role – so complete was his empathy – actually killed the one playing Hiranyakasipu. Apocryphal or true, the custom exists of tying a rope around the waist of Nrsimha. The rope held by two or three stagehands who must avert a killing should the spirit of Nrsimha take charge. The choice of an actor for the role is made with much care. In some villages, such as Bokagaon near Chhatrapur, the district headquarters, the mask is worshipped in a temple and is believed to have divine powers.

Once the play begins it may proceed without a break to its conclusion – it is not divided into scenes and acts. Generally, however, the gahaka stops the performance for a breather now and then, but only after a sequence has been completed. There are also occasional breaks for the actors to don their costumes,

but these intermissions do not in any way mar the flow of the story.

Prahlad Natak, following the Sanskrit tradition, and being basically a theatre of serious intent, adopts natyadharmi presentation, but at times is totally realistic (lokadharmi). For instance, the scenes of Prahlad's torture. When Hiranyakasipu cannot dissuade his son from worshipping Visnu, he orders his servants to punish Prahlad to bring him round. Of the various tortures Prahlad suffers, one is having a cobra put around his neck. In this sequence, often, a live snake is used. Then again, Prahlad's fire-ordeal. This sequence is presented with great imagination, blending realism with stylisation. Prahlad sits on the hub of a bullock cart wheel, which is mounted on an axle so that it turns in the air, horizontally. Flaming torches are fixed on the rim of the wheel, so that when the king's servants turn the wheel, Prahlad at its centre appears engulfed in flames. He sings on in praise of Visnu and a group of Vaisnava devotees wail in lamentation. Both visually and aurally the scene is very effective. Often, Hiranyakasipu rides in to the acting area on an elephant, fireworks adding explosive effect to his arrival. These are not gimmicks to impress the audience, although in the telling they may so appear. The audience, at any rate, is prepared for all extravagance, having watched the drama umpteen times.

Watching Prahlad Natak is an unforgettable experience. Music, dance, stylised mime, poetry, spectacle, colourful costumes and sumptuous decorations, all combine to induce a state of consciousness between wakefulness and dream. Refusing the 'trip', the literal minded will be bored or dazed at the end of the show.



Shadow Theatre – the Ancient Movie

Shadows present objects in an unknown and mysterious dimension. A shadow intentionally created to represent an object or a living being appears fascinating because of the inevitable stylised lineament. When such shadows move to delineate an event the effect is at once fascinating, mysterious and dramatic. Bertolt Brecht, the famous German playwright and thinker who has immensely influenced the contemporary theatre, believed that every so-called ordinary object should appear strange to us in the theatre. Moving shadows create that kind of alienation intensifying the dramatic effect. This was perhaps the basic motive on which shadow theatre was evolved.

Shadow theatre also known as shadow play or shadow show is, in fact, a kind of puppetry. Flat puppet figures, usually made of leather, are lightly pressed on a translucent screen with a strong source of light behind. The audience sitting on the other side of the illuminated screen does not see the puppets but sees their shadows on the screen. The puppeteers who manipulate the figures place themselves in such a way that neither are they seen by the audience nor do their shadows fall on the screen.

Although it is a kind of puppetry, this is delightfully different from all other forms of theatre. One, in the human and puppet stages a real world of three dimensional spaces is created in which actors or articulated figures have direct contract with the audience. But in shadow theatre the contact is always indirect as the audience sits on the other side of the screen. Thus, spectators and actors separated by the light screen are placed as if in different rooms. The spectator is by himself and his feeling of isolation is

heightened by the darkness all around. He does not directly experience the figures and the play; he only sees the image, the projection. The light screen here is most important as it filters and modifies the image, the projection. On the inner side of the screen the actor (the manipulator) too is isolated. He presents a projection of his thoughts and expects the spectator to interpret and to re-assemble them into a new image. It is not the object in his hand but its image on the screen that decides his action. In his fantasy there are thoughts and ideas. He translates them into moving shadow pictures. In the mind of the audience these pictures are retranslated into happenings. This makes shadow theatre an exciting experience.

The term motion picture applies more accurately to the shadow theatre. Because in cinema the pictures do not move but a sequence of consecutive pictures of objects, photographed in motion by specially designed camera, is thrown on a screen by a projector in a rapid succession as to give the illusion of natural movement. In shadow theatre the pictures actually move. Therefore, shadow theatre can be called as the most ancient form of the movie.

The tradition of shadow theatre not only originated in India, but reached a high degree of evolvement and sophistication. It is unfortunate that such a rich tradition has been languishing in remote rural areas for the last hundred or more years without patronage, without connoisseurship. Fortunately, six varying styles of traditional shadow theatre still survive in the rural areas of Orissa, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Among these six styles of traditional shadow theatre while the Orissa, Maharashtra and Kerala styles throw black and white

shadows on the screen, the Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra styles throw fascinating coloured shadows. A sensitive theatre-goer, to whom a stylised presentation gives much deeper and more intense dramatic experience than the realistic, will be thrilled to witness any of these styles of traditional shadow theatre. He could not have imagined that stylised shadows have such dramatic vigour and that they can take drama to heights from beyond the reach of any live actor.

The traditional shadow shows have each a particular name in the language spoken in the regions where they prevail. In Kerala it is called Thol Pava Koothu (Malayalam), in Tamil Nadu, Tholu Bommalatam (Tamil), in Karnataka, Togalu Gombeyatta (Karnataka), and in Andhra Pradesh, Tholu Bommalata (Telugu). The literal meaning of them all is dance of the leather puppets. The Maharashtrian shadow show is, however, called Chamdyacha Behulye meaning the leather puppets. In this style the puppet figures are mostly non-articulate and therefore, perhaps, dance is not added to the name. The way Orissa shadow show has been named is interesting, in the sense that the usual pattern is not followed. It is called Ravanachhaya, meaning the shadow of Ravana. The three opaque styles, prevalent in Kerala, Maharastra and Orissa that present their shadows in black and white, base the themes of their puppet plays exclusively on the legend of Rama. Naturally it would have been more appropriate if the Orissa shadow show had been named Ramachhaya but there is an interesting metaphysical reason for naming it otherwise. Rama is a divine being and the word devata, god, is derived from the root *div* meaning to shine. Therefore, the literal meaning of the word devata is a shining being which cannot cast its own shadow. Besides, shadow is dependent on light. His physical shape may

cast a shadow, but to connect his name with chhaya perhaps appeared to the innovators as both incongruous and inappropriate.

Of all the differing styles of leather puppets, those of Ravanachhaya, made of deer skin, are the least sophisticated.

They are made of a single piece of skin and have no joint limbs. The cutting and stenciling of the figures are done with an apparent naiveté. Looking at them one can never imagine their shadows will be wonderful, bold and dramatic. Although not articulated, they are manipulated with a kind of jigging and the technique never appears inadequate to a sensitive audience who has a taste not for gimmicks but for subtleties.

Leather puppets of Maharashtra style are, though mostly unarticulated a shade more sophisticated than those of Ravanachhaya. The only living puppeteer of Pinguli village does not know how to prepare a new puppet figure. The ones he has are more than 150 years old. They are the smallest of the six styles of leather puppets. The parchment also is much thinner.

So far as the actual stenciling is concerned, puppets of no other styles surpass that of the Kerala style. Filigree like chisel cuts on the leather wonderfully delineate the jewellery and the embroidered costume shows the puppets' character. Like Ravanachhaya puppets these figures also look drab off the screen but their shadow are breathtakingly beautiful and they show what enrichment a silhouette can have. Of the three styles shadow theatre, that of Andhra Pradesh uses the largest figures ranging from four to six feet. These figures have also multiple jointed limbs and therefore are the most mobile. In Karnataka, two kinds of leather puppets are used, a larger one resembling the Andhra puppet and the other called chikka is small in size ranging from

one and a half to two and a half feet. The chikka shadow presents highly decorative group scenes, each depicted in one figure. These group figures are brought on to the screen like freeze shots, to punctuate and intensity the dramatic effect. A few group figures like Ravana abducting Sita in Pushpaka Vimana, have joint parts to give partial articulation to the inarticulate figures.

The shadow theatre tradition of Tamil Nadu is on the verge of extinction. So far only one traditional puppeteer could be traced. He has a few old leather puppets beautifully coloured with vegetable dyes, but since making a leather puppet is quite expensive he had to resort to cheaper materials like card-board, tissue and cellophane paper for the purpose. The art may be lost for ever if the clientele for it does not increase many times of what it is now.

Although the shadow theatre traditions are barely surviving, owing to the stagnation of patronage for more than a few centuries, their quality of production has suffered a lot. Yet what survives, be it any of the styles discussed above, will offer many prize moments to a sensitive audience. Dramatic scenes, such as, Rama and Ravana fighting and their shadow arrows flashing across the screen like dark lightning, or Hanuman uprooting the shadow trees of the shadowy Ashok Forest or setting fire to the golden city of Lanka, or Arjuna's arrow beheading a Kaurava stalwart, come out with such dramatic and lyrical beauty that it is inconceivable in any other form of theatre.

It will be a great pity if such aesthetically rich and fascinating traditions die out because of utter negligence. Government patronage cannot make an art tradition live for ever, especially in a democratic set-up. Again, it is the size of the clientele that has

always decided the health of an art form. Unless the sensitive members of our society turn a part of their interest away from the intoxicating and glamorous media like movie, television and video, and direct it towards the shadow theatre which is aesthetically far more satisfying, the said tradition cannot be saved from the cruel hands of time.

Shadow Puppetry and Ravanachhaya of Orissa

Shadows present objects in an unknown dimension. Bertolt Brecht believed that every so-called ordinary object should appear strange to us in the theatre. A play with light and shadow creates that kind of alienation.

Shadow theatre is different from all other forms of theatre, including puppet plays with marionettes. On the human and puppet stages a real world of space is created in which actors or figures have direct contact with the audience. The effect of a shadow play is always indirect although it is a form of puppetry in which flat figures, usually made of leather, are lightly pressed on a translucent screen with a strong source of light behind. The audience sits on the other side of the screen and sees the shadows moving when the figures are manipulated. Thus, spectators and actors separated by the light screen are placed as if in different rooms. The spectator is by himself and his feeling of isolation is heightened by the darkness all around. He does not directly experience the figures and the play; he only sees the image, the projection. The light screen is here most important as it filters and modifies the action. On the inner side of the screen, the actor (I mean the manipulator) too is isolated. He presents a projection of his thoughts and expects the spectator to interpret and to reassemble them into a new image. It is not the object in his hand but its image on the screen that decides his action. In his mind there are thoughts and ideas. He translates them into moving pictures. In the mind of the audience these pictures are retranslated into happenings. This makes shadow theatre an exciting experience.

Ravanachhaya is a rare form of shadow theatre from Orissa. It is necessary to trace the origin and growth of the form in order to have a comprehensive idea of it. History has been unduly negligent about art forms. Historical evidence such as edicts, epigraphic records, etc. crop up sometimes to help in a tangential way. Therefore, to trace the origin of Ravanachhaya one has to begin with the history of shadow theatre in general and that of the Indian tradition in particular.

Many people consider the shadow play to be the oldest of all theatre forms. Some scholars maintain that it began in India while others are emphatic about its origin in China. Those who hold the latter view draw support from a Chinese legend which tells of Wu-ti, an Emperor of the Han dynasty who reigned some 150 years before the Christian era who, being heartbroken at the death of his favourite concubine, commanded his court necromancers to summon back her spirit. One of them acceded to his request and in a darkened chamber on a distant screen was able to evoke a resembling shadow with which apparently the emperor was satisfied.

There is a similar legend about the origin of Turkish shadow theatre. It cannot be denied that legends often contain facts of an obscure past but it is equally true that they are highly coloured by imagination and therefore cannot be relied upon as historical evidence.

Paintings and writings dating back to the early part of the Sung dynasty (A.D. 960-1279), however, provide evidence of the existence of shadow theatre in China. The tradition of shadow theatre in Java seems to be equally ancient. The shadow theatre in Java is known as Wayang Kulit. There is a reference to Wayang

in a recently published inscription which has been attributed to King Balitung (A.D. 898 to 910)[1]. Dr. Hazeu holds the view that Wayang was prevalent in Java about 800 Saka.

Scholars differ about the origin of Wayang. Among those who attribute an Indian origin to Wayang are: Hageman (Handeling tot de Geschiedenis Van Java 1, p.47). Poensen, Veth and Krom. Others including Hazeu and Brandes adhere to the opinion that Wayang was innovated in Java and not borrowed from the Hindus. Their arguments to establish their viewpoint may be summed up as follows:

1. The Hindus never had a shadow play.

2. Originally Wayang was a typically Indonesian religious ceremony in honour of the gods or of forefathers. Though later it took the form of entertainment even now it shows signs of having had a religious origin.

3. All the technical terms used in Wayang Kulit are purely Javanese.

The weakness of these arguments can be demonstrated very easily.

The assumption that the Hindus had no tradition of shadow theatre betrays a lack of information. Pischel and Luders are of the opinion that the famous Sanskrit drama Mahanataka was originally a shadow play.[2] Winternitz also holds the view that Mahanataka has a great resemblance with Wayang plays. The date of Mahanataka has not yet been fixed, but it was surely written earlier than 850 A.D. since Anandavardhana quotes it in his writings. Dutangada, another dramatic work by Subhata of 13th century A.D., is expressly designated a chhayanatak or shadow play.

It would be relevant to point out here that the term chhaya natak has raised some controversy among scholars. Dr. S.K. De[3] has summarised the various possible interpretations of the term as used by different scholars:

1. Outline of a drama or entrance (Wilson and Rajendralal Mitra)

2. Shadow of a drama or half drama (Pischel)

3. A drama in the state of a shadow (Levi)

Dr. De himself, however, is of the opinion that the term chhaya natak does not mean a shadow play:

Having regard to the derivative nature of the plays, like the Dutangada and Mahanataka which incorporates verses from known and unknown Rama dramas, it is not impossible to hold that the term chhaya natak means an epitomised adaptation of previous plays on the subject, the term chhaya being a well known technical term used in the sense of borrowing or adaptation. It should be noted that the chhayanatak, in the sense of a shadow play, is not a category of Sanskrit dramatic composition and is unknown to the theorists as a dramatic genre, early or later.

One can hold such a view if the following definite evidences are ignored:

1. Dharmabhyudaya of Meghaprabha-charya has been designated at the end as a chhayanataka-prabandha. Though the date of this drama cannot yet be fixed with certainty, one of the stage directions in it reads:

From behind the screen a puppet dressed as a sage is to be brought on.

The tradition of shadow theatre still survives in Orissa, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The shadow theatres of Orissa

and Kerala draw exclusively upon the Rama legend for their themes, while those of Andhra and Karnataka draw also from Mahabharata and Srimad Bhagavata. The scholars who have not seen the performances of these traditional forms of shadow theatre cannot comprehend many stage directions and conventions mentioned in the old Sanskrit plays expressly designated as chhayanatak. For instance, in Ullagharaghava, another chhayanatak by Somesvara written in the 13th century, a dialogue between two characters reads as follows:

Vrikamukha: Friend, the images of Rama and Laxmana that I carry in my heart, I have depicted in this picture for the pleasure of my Lord. Please have a look at it. (He gives the picture).

Karpatika (taking it and looking at it): Well done, great man, well done. This has been beautifully painted according to the conventions of shadow theatre. (Thus he speaks).

One who has little idea about the presentational techniques of a shadow play would hasten to believe that the word patrapata (in the Sanskrit original of the above quotation) means any picture on a flat surface[4]. In a shadow play the puppets are made of flat pieces of leather. But confusion arises as to how a painting could be shown in a shadow play. In the Karnataka style of shadow play there is an interesting technique of presenting at times a composite colourful scene depicted in one puppet figure. These highly decorative scenes or group figures are brought on to the screen to punctuate and intensify the dramatic effect in the same way as freeze shots are used in films. There are strict conventions for the delineation of these colourful group figures. Therefore, Karpatika says in the above quotation that the picture is painted according to the conventions of the shadow play, which clearly

indicate that it is not a picture painted in the usual way and hence not a picture scroll. There are distinct differences in the conventions of stylized delineation of characters in a shadow play from those in picture scrolls. Therefore, the dramatists intentionally used the word chhayanatyanusarena (in the original) which otherwise becomes redundant.

Thus a number of ancient stage conventions and techniques can be comprehended if the folk and traditional forms of theatre, their rituals, preliminaries and actual performances are closely examined.

The preceding discussion unmistakably proves that India has a very ancient tradition of shadow theatre. The fact that this branch of theatre is not mentioned in the Natyashastra nor included in the ten roopakas can also be explained.

All the ancient Indian treatises on performing arts, especially on dance and theatre, deal in great detail only with sophisticated and highly evolved forms which more often than not flourished under royal patronage. No due attention was paid to art forms prevalent among the common people. Therefore, folk forms have been referred to here and there but, perhaps, never have they been dealt with in detail. Again, the Indian dramaturgists were solely preoccupied with human theatre. Puppet theatre, which had a folk character, was therefore, not considered in any of the treatises on dramaturgy. Bharata, dealing exclusively with human theatre, of course, did not mention puppetry, but in his masterly treatise he has termed the key man in the production of a play as sutradhar, which literally means the holder of the strings. This term might have found its way into theatre terminology centuries before Bharata, but must have come from marionette theatre. It

can also be reasonably assumed that human theatre evolved much later than puppetry. And most of the scholars agree that shadow theatre is the earliest form of puppetry. Thus there is every reason to believe that shadow theatre was prevalent in India much before the 4th century B.C. (since in Patanjali's Mahabhasya there are references to the staging of plays by live actors)[5].

There are countless evidences to prove that Hazeu is totally mistaken in assuming that India had no tradition of shadow theatre. He has, however, convincingly refuted the view held by many scholars that Wayang had a Chinese origin. He is of the firm opinion that Wayang owes its origin to none. But there are facts which question this opinion. For instance:

In Wayang-Purva, the earliest type of Wayang in Java, the themes of the plays are always drawn from Ramayana and Mahabharata.

There is no evidence that the shadow play was known in Java till the Hindu religion and culture were thoroughly established in that island.

The regions in India where the tradition of shadow theatre now also survives, especially that which was earlier known as Kalinga, had long cultural, commercial and political ties with Java, so much so that a part of this island was known as Kalinga[6]. In the field of traditional human theatre, the Wayang Topeng and Wayang Wong have many similarities with the Chhau dance theatre of Orissa.

There is little doubt that originally Wayang had strong religious associations. It has been proved that the Brahminical religion travelling from India was firmly established in Java by the 8th century A.D. The beginning of this form of religion is traced to

the 4th or 5th century A.D.[7]

The argument that originally Wayang was a typically Indonesian religious ceremony in honour of gods or of forefathers, and therefore, could not have been borrowed from Hindus, is again extremely weak. On this Dr. R.C. Majumdar writes, "...the worship of ancestors is common to both Indians and Indonesians. Further, no other Indonesian people, except the Javanese, have developed an institution like Wayang in connection with this worship. These facts, the truth of which cannot be doubted for a moment, considerably weaken the force of the arguments advanced by Brandes and Hazeu"[8]. Although indigenous elements must have contributed to the formation of a Javanese character for the Wayang, it is nevertheless impossible to separate it from Indian sources which gave it form in the beginning. A.C. Scott also holds a similar opinion and says about the Wayang shadow play: "Although this philosophy here takes on its special Javanese flavour, it is after all one that underlies much Asian intellectual and artistic expression and has its roots in the elemental conclusions of Indian philosophical speculation"[9].

The Brahminical religion of India was firmly established in Java by about the 8th century A.D. which is evident from the Cangal inscription. It records that in A.D. 732 king Shri Sanjaya set-up a linga on a hill[10]. Dr. R.C. Majumdar has traced this form of religion in Java as early as the 4th or 5th century A.D.[11].

The surviving shadow theatre forms of India still have pronounced religious associations. Tolpava Koothu, the shadow theatre of Kerala, even now retains its ritualistic character as the actual show is preceded by preliminaries which are religious in character.

The third argument that all the technical terms in connection with Wayang are purely Javanese appears on the surface convincing, but closer examination may prove it as weak as the other two arguments. Dr. R.C. Majumdar says:

It is always risky to infer the indigenous or foreign character of an article or thing from the terms used to denote it. For example, in Bengal, the watch, clock and their accessories are known by indigenous terms (ghadi, kata, etc.) while the words for inkpot, pen and book are all foreign. Are we to conclude from this that while watch and clock are indigenous products of Bengal, the Bengalis owed their literary culture to Arabs and Parsis? Krom tells us that even today the Javanese are in the habit of giving indigenous names to articles imported from Europe and America. It stands to reason, therefore, that the indigenous names for Wayang and its accessories do not necessarily imply any indigenous origin of the institution.[12]

Dr. Majumdar's argument, though quite convincing, is indirect. We, therefore, propose to examine some of the technical terms used in Wayang and see if they have any relationship with languages including Sanskrit:

1. Chamma Rupa: This means a leather puppet. Unmistakably it is derived from the Sanskrit word charma rupa. Its Prakrit equivalent is chhama rupa. In chaste Oriya, shadow theatre is called charma-nataka which literally means leather theatre.

2. Wanda: The term means emotion or mood of a character. The puppet of a major Wayang figure is carved and painted in several different wanda. This term resembles the Sanskrit word vandha which means a posture or composition. In Oriya language the 'wa' sound is pronounced 'ba'. Therefore, in Oriya, Java is

pronounced Jaba. Vandha in Oriya is pronounced bandha and it has the same meaning as in Sanskrit. Bandha is commonly used in the performing arts of Orissa, such as bandhanritya – a dance in Odissi style composed with difficult gestures, the terms of which are given in Abhinava Chandrika – a treatise on Odissi dance written in 16th century A.D. as 'bandhaputita'. In Ravanachhaya this word is used for denoting the posture of the puppet in which it is to be delineated.

3. Suluk: The term in Wayang is used for the mood songs sung by the dalang. It has similarity with the Sanskrit word sloka which means a versified composition recited rhythmically.

4. Dalang: The term is used for the main performer in the Wayang play. In Oriya, dalai means the headman of a village or a troupe. It is also a surname found exclusively in Orissa. Dala in Oriya means a troupe, especially a performing troupe. Now of course the headman of a performing troupe is called ostad in Orissa, but the word is of Persian origin and must have gained currency after the Mughal invasion of Orissa. Earlier they were called guru (which means a teacher) or dalai.

5. Gapuran: The word literally means gate. Adegan Gapuan is the gate scene which follows the first scene of a Wayang play. The Oriya word gopura means a gateway[13].

6. Alus: The term in Wayang denotes a puppet of refined character. In Oriya the word alasa means relaxed but graceful posture. Many such sculptures are found on the walls of Konark, which are known as alasakanyas.

7. Lamphan: Used for the technique of moving puppets in walking, sitting and standing positions. The Sanskrit word lamphan means to jump. In Ravanachhaya the puppets are moved in a sort

of jumping manner.

8. Talu: In Wayang the term means the introductory music played before performance. In colloquial Oriya talu means scalp.

9. Bedolan: Used for the technique of removing puppets from the debog. In Sanskrit and also in Oriya bidolana means either to remove from a swing or swinging something in a special manner.

10. Kalir: Denotes the puppet screen of Wayang. In Oriya keli means play and kilipura the theatre hall[14].

11. Gammelan: The Javanese orchestra is known by this term. In Oriya melana means an assemblage and also a special type of festival in which deities are brought from different villages with the accompaniment of characteristic instrumental music. A type of instrumental prelude is known as joodi-melana.

There are also other technical terms which bear similarity with Oriya words. The close link between Kalinga and Java is a well founded fact. Even now Indian immigrants in South-east Asia are called Kalinga[15]. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Ravanachhaya, the traditional shadow theatre of Kalinga, inspired Wayang in Java, not vice-versa, since the puppet figures of Ravanachhaya are less sophisticated and have a more primitive quality in conception and design.

The question may arise here that as far back as the 6th or 7th century A.D. was there the Oriya language to influence the Wayang terminology? Though the Oriya script took the present rounded shape quite late, say around 14th century A.D., the language did exist and was being written in the Brahmi script from the 3rd century A.D. to the 6th century A.D. There are also a Kalinga script that developed between the 6th century and 12th century A.D. There are a number of epigraphic records to prove



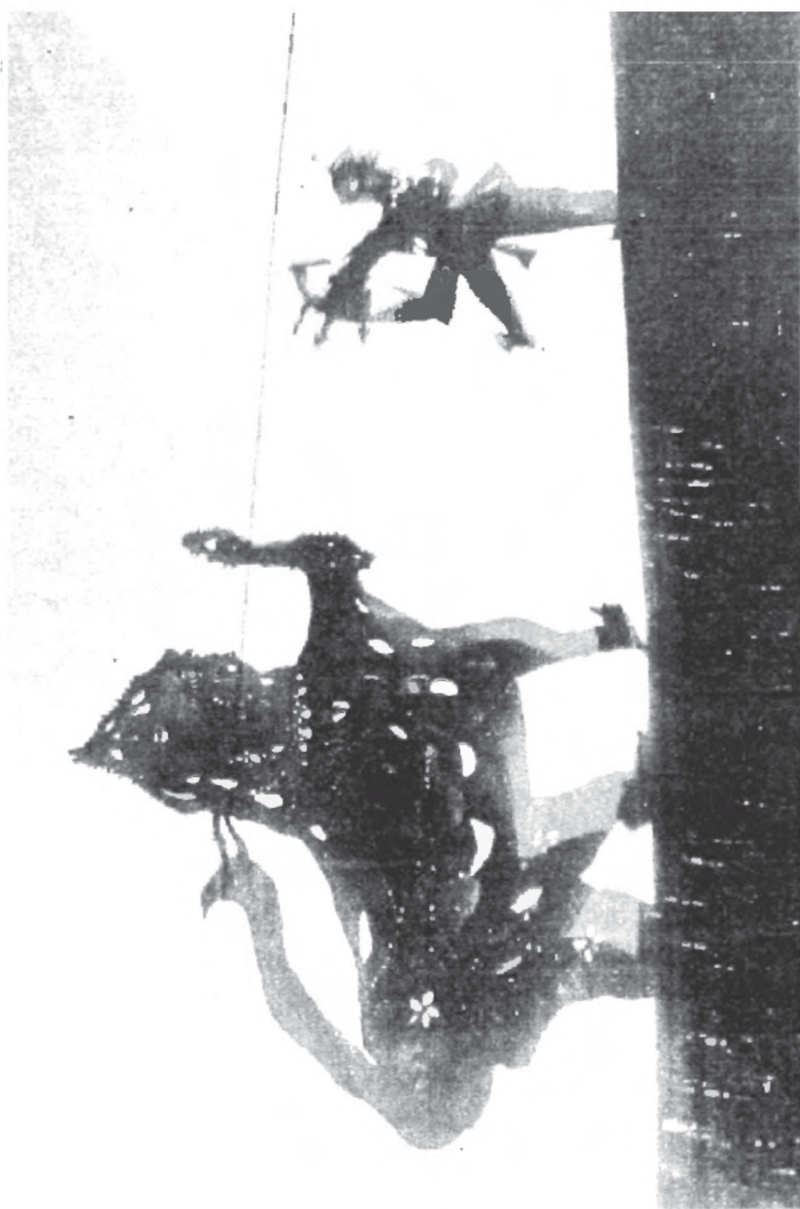


this. The region which is now known as Orissa had a distinctly different language by the 7th century, which is evident from the accord to Orissa given by Hiusn Tsang. The famous Chinese traveller passed through this region in or about the year 638 A.D. and he writes that the people "were of violent ways, tall and dark complexioned, in speech and manner different from the people of central India". They are also described as quite persevering in their studies and zealous about learning. A people who had a love of studies and learning must have been adequately cultured and their speech, differing from that of central India, was surely developed. Oriya language, at any time, like other

regional languages, had in its vocabulary a large number of words from Sanskrit. Therefore, it is possible that the seafaring navigators of Kalinga not only carried Ravanachhaya to Java but also some technical terms in their own language, which after undergoing inevitable changes, are still in use in the Wayang shadow theatre.

The close relationship between Kalinga and Wayang shadow theatre is further borne out by the fact that one of the ancient lakons, that is, short dramatic sketches to refresh the memory of a dalang, bears the name Bambang Kalinga[16]. There is thus a strong possibility that Ravanachhaya and Wayang were closely related more than 1000 years ago.

It is interesting to note that this form of shadow theatre, though based on the Rama story, is named after Ravana. Forms of shadow theatre surviving in the regions of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala are named, respectively, Tulu Bommalata, Togalu Gombeyatta and Tolpava Koothu, each literally meaning 'dance of leather dolls'. This manner of naming the form has not been followed in Orissa, because Ravanachhaya literally means the 'shadow of Ravana'. The puppet representing Ravana is much larger than that of Rama and also more boldly and dramatically conceived. This may indicate the influence of Jainism and Buddhism. It is stated in the Jaina Harivamsa Purana that Mahavira Vardhamana (599 B.C. to 527 B.C.) preached Jainsim in Kalinga[17]. This is also mentioned in Haribhadriya Vritti, another sacred book of the Jainas. With the Kalinga invasion of Ashoka in the 3rd century B.C. Buddhism came to be dominant, but soon after, during the reign of Kharavela (2nd century B.C.), Jainism was revived in Kalinga and it held sway for more than 200 years. From the writings of Taranatha we learn that in the



first century A.D. the great Buddhist saint Nagarjuna came to Orissa to preach Shunyavad. He converted King Munja to Buddhism and built many Buddhist monasteries in Orissa[18]. After that, from about the 9th century, when Shankaracharya came to Orissa, Brahmanism claimed dominance. From the 12th century to the 17th century almost all the rulers of Orissa subscribed to Vaishnavism. From the 3rd century B.C. to 9th century A.D. Brahminism was alternately fighting Buddhism and Jainism for dominance in this region. Jaina Rama stories do not paint Ravana as a demon king but as Prati-Vasudev. Paumachariya by Vimal Suri is, perhaps, the earliest Jaina Ramayana. According to Jaina tradition it was written in 72 A.D., but considering it from the language point of view Jacobi and other scholars date it to the 4th century A.D. [19]. In this work Ravana is killed not by Rama but Laxamana who goes to hell for his sin. On the other hand Ravana after some births attains the status of an arhant, i.e. super-saint. This respectful treatment of Ravana is also found in some Buddhist literature like Lankavatarasutra. Dharmakirti (6th century A.D.) paints Ravana as an ideal Buddhist king[20]. Therefore, it is possible that Ravanachhya during its formative period came under the influence of Jainism or Buddhism. Such a surmise is further strengthened by the fact that Charmabhyudaya by Meghaprabhacharya, which is the earliest chhayanatak to indicate unmistakably the use of shadow puppets in Jaina drama, presents the story of the conversion of a king to the Jaina faith[21]. Though the chhayanatak cannot yet be dated with certainty, it surely points to the Jaina tradition of popularising their faith through the medium of shadow theatre.

Another explanation, however, is readily offered for naming the form Ravanachhaya. Rama is a god. As in Sanskrit, so in

Oriya, the word for god is devata, which is derived from the root '*div*', meaning 'to shine'. Devata is therefore a being that is luminous. A luminous body does not cast its own shadow but when it is present the shadows of other opaque objects are cast. Rama is no minor god but the incarnation of God and therefore compounding chhaya with Rama to name the form would be philosophically incongruous. The plausibility of this explanation is strengthened by the fact that the puppeteers, at times, refer to this form as Ramanatak – the drama of Rama – but when the word chhaya is compounded it is always Ravanachhaya.

However, the plausibility of the explanation is questioned by the fact that the puppet representing Rama does cast a shadow on the screen in actuality and the puppet figure is designed in no special way. On the other hand, the Ravana figure looks towering in comparison with that of Rama. Of course, Ravana has been so characterised in Ramayana as to inspire the imagination of the original puppet designer for a highly stylistic treatment. Nevertheless, Rama should not look insignificant in comparison with Ravana unless there is some special motive for it. Therefore, it would not be far fetched to assume that Ravanachhaya initially was influenced by the Jaina Ramayana: Paumachariya of Vimal Suri.

Ravanachhaya draws exclusively upon the Rama legend. There is no written play. It is entirely contained in the oral tradition. However, it uses lyrics from the Vichitra Ramayana written by Viswanath Khuntia, a medieval Oriya poet. Impromptu prose dialogue plays an important role in the presentational style. The spoken word material, though mostly colloquial and marked for



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its spontaneity, owes much to the various Rama literatures in Oriya.

Orissa has a strong Ramayana tradition, especially in literature. While there are only three to four versions of the Mahabharata, more than five versions of the Ramayana are found in Oriya, out of which "about half a dozen are of lyrical variety, to be sung and acted, the most celebrated being the Vichitra Ramayana of Viswanath Khuntia and Nata Ramayana of Kesava Pattanayak. Kesava's rendering makes an enchanting Jatra and has the deep human touches of a true poet"[22]. Thus it is clear that the Ramayana has greatly influenced the traditional theatre of Orissa.

Since Ravanachhaya closely follows the Vichitra Ramayana of Viswanath Khuntia, it is relevant here to throw some light on the poet and his work. Viswanath Khuntia was a resident of Puri, which is famous for the temple of Lord Jagannath. He composed the Vichitra Ramayan during the rule of Raja Dibyasingha Deva from 1692 to 1720 A.D. The towering poets of this time are Dinakrushna and Upendra Bhanja. The latter is prefixed with the title of Kavi Samrat, Emperor of Poets. Both of them wrote highly ornate poetry, which has excellence in craftsmanship with a sort of dictional tapestry and uninhibited use of shringara rasa. Though that was the age for ornate poetry, Viswanath Khuntia chose to write in a completely different style which is simple, colloquial and with no stress on erotic symbolism. Yet he is as lyrical as his contemporary poets.

Thematically, Vichitra Ramayana has not departed much from the original Sanskrit Ramayana except for identifying Rama with Lord Jagannath of Puri. In the beginning there is an interesting description of the Ratha Jatra (car festival) of Puri. This aspect,

however, is not reflected in Ravanachhaya, which proves that the shadow theatre, originating centuries before, adopted it, like the human theatre forms of the region, because of its lyrical character and easy adaptability to dramatic forms.

Vichitra Ramayana, which is now available in print, contains 289 Chhandas (cantos). Scholars are of the opinion that Viswanath composed only 237 Chhandas and the other 52 are interpolations[23]. The poet has indicated the raga and tala for some of the Chhandas. The ragas often used in this work are Kamodi, Mukhari, Madhukari, Bhatiari, etc. and the talas Sarimana, Padi, Pata etc. All these are peculiar to the Odissi School of classical music. Many Chhandas, although indicated to be sung in a particular raga and tala, are often sung to traditional tunes that do not follow the indication of the poet. In Ravanachhaya the Chhandas of Vichitra Ramayana are sung in traditional tunes, which have a more folk character and therefore match the style of presentation.

Vichitra Ramayana became so popular that it found a following in the works of some later poets like Raja Vikram Narendra, Ananga Narendra, Shaibya Sadashiva and Ishwaradas. These and other language Ramayanas are the source from which the spoken material for the performance of Ravanachhaya is drawn.

Strictly according to the tradition the Ravanachhaya, shadow puppets are made only of deerskin. In an indigenous process the skin is dried and tanned. The hair is then removed and the outline of the puppet figure is cut out. Ravanachhaya puppets have no joints. Therefore, the conception and delineation of the puppet figures are highly stylized. The cutouts are perforated very simply yet imaginatively to give a characteristically posed outline of the

characters, and also to delineate the clothes and accessories. The figures are held erect by the grip of a split bamboo stick which runs through the middle line and down a few extra inches to give handling space.

The puppets are of different sizes. The largest is about 18 inches high while the smallest is about 6 inches. More than 700 puppets are required for a complete Ravanachhaya show, which used to be performed over seven nights, presenting on each night only one kanda of the Ramayana. Each major character of the Ramayana is represented by one puppet figure. In a few cases there are two figures for one character. For example, there are two figures, one small, the other large, for Hanuman. According to the demand of the dramatic situation either the larger or the smaller one is pressed into service. In the episode of Rama asking Hanuman to go to Lanka in search of Sita, in the beginning the smaller figure is used, but it is substituted by the bigger one suggesting expansion of his body when Hanuman actually takes the leap across the sea to land on Lanka.

There are stock characters like the village barber and his grandson who appear on the screen at the commencement of the play. There are also a number of figures for props such as trees, mountains, chariots, arrows, missiles like nagapasha, houses, palanquins, etc. for creating an appropriate setting.

Interesting conventions are followed when a puppet figure is first commissioned to the performance and also when, torn, a figure is required to be rejected. After a puppet figure is complete a sort of puja is performed to breathe life into it. Thereafter, it acquires the status of remaining in the basket where other live puppets are kept. The basket usually is kept in the bedroom of

the puppeteer when there is no performance.

When a puppet figure 'dies' of age or accidentally gets torn so that it no longer remains worthy of being commissioned to a performance, certain exequies are observed. Preferably at the time of sunset the unusable puppet figure is taken to a river all the way with the chanting of mantras and respectfully immersed in the flowing waters of the river.

Setting up a stage for a Ravanachhaya performance is very simple. Two poles fixed six and seven feet apart, a four to five yard long white cotton cloth (dhoti is ideal), two to three straw mats, a few nails, and four to five yards of thread are all that is needed for putting up the stage, which should have some covering on top so that the light does not get too dispersed. First the straw mats are stretched from one pole to the other like a screen, touching the ground. The mats are usually 3-1/2 feet in width and they serve the purpose of hiding the manipulators, who squat on the ground while manipulating: they also provide a support for such puppet figures as are to remain stationary for some time e.g. the props which form the setting. The handle of the puppet figure is inserted into the loops formed by the woven pattern of the mats. This keeps the figure upright and lightly pressed to the screen for as long as the puppeteers wish. On top of the opaque mat screen, the cloth is stretched taut by tying both ends to the two poles, and this serves the purpose of the light screen.

The light source is a bowl-shaped earthen lamp filled with oil, with three thick wicks made of rolled cotton rags. This lamp is put on a stand made of a long bamboo peg with a small wooden plank fixed to the untapered end. The tapered end is driven into the soil in such a way that the lamp, when placed on the wooden

plank, reaches about 12 to 15 inches from the bottom of the light screen at the horizontally central line; the distance between the lamp and the screen is at the most about 12 inches. The puppeteers squat on the ground and present different puppets in between the lamp and the light screen.

The soul of a Ravanachhaya performance is its music. The style of singing blends the folk and classical Odissi traditions. The lyrics of the Vichitra Ramayana are very popular in rural Orissa. Most of the villagers know quite a few of them by heart and sing them to popular traditional tunes. Ravanachhaya follows this traditional style in singing the lyrics from Vichitra Ramayana although some of the verses carry the author's indication to sing in a particular raga and tala of the Odissi School of music. The singing style has some similarity with that of Palagana and Daskathia, two forms of dramatic balladry, the former being highly sophisticated both in form and content. The percussive accompaniment to the vocal music is provided by the Khanjani and Daskathi.

The khanjani is a single faced membranophone. The resonator frame is a wooden ring of about 6 inch diameter at the outer face, to which the parchment is fixed and about 4-1/2 inch inner diameter with a depth of about 2-1/2 to 3 inches. The frame has two to four pairs of jingle-plates. The parchment is made of the skin of the godhi, a reptile similar to the iguana. The khanjani is held by the frame with the left hand and is played with the four fingers of the right hand. It is an extremely popular percussion instrument in rural Orissa. There is a form of folk song named Khanjani Geet which is generally devotional in character.

The Daskathi is a wooden idiophone of the castanet variety.

Two pieces of wood of about 5 x 1x1/2 inch are held in the left hand, the forefinger placed in between. Sound is produced by striking alternately on it with the base of the thumb and the closely joined fingers of the right hand. This idiophone is capable of producing rhythmic patterns of amazing variety and in a very fast tempo. The percussive music produced by it is so popular in rural Orissa that a highly interesting form of balladry known as Daskathia has been named after. Before the play begins a coconut is broken in two and a puja is performed invoking the blessings of Rama and Ganesha. Then the leader-cum-chief-narrator with a Khanjani in his hand comes out and stands right to the stage in full view of the audience. He then prays to Rama in a Sanskrit sloka, which is followed by an impromptu prose introduction to the episodes to be presented for that particular performance. He then plays on his Khanjani a sort of percussive preliminary.

After the preliminaries, two stock characters—the village barber and his grandson—appear on the screen. They are very small puppets, about six inches in height. The narrator in impromptu prose speaks the dialogue for both characters. The dialogue is humorous and leads to the episode of the birth of Rama in Ayodhya. The relevant lyric from the Vichitra Ramayana is then sung. In singing the chief narrator is assisted by one or two vocalists, usually from behind the screen. The vocalists also play on the Daskathi and a pair of small cymbals called gini.

There are three puppeteers behind the screen. They squat on the ground and manipulate the puppets according to the demands of the prose dialogue and the texts of the songs. The shadows of the manipulators do not fall on the screen since a mat, made of a locally grown straw, is stretched between the screen and the

ground.

The episode structure of the play follows the same sequence as the serialised lyrics of the Vichitra Ramayana. The leader links one lyric to the next by prose or recitative verse passages. These linking passages are entirely in the oral tradition.

The highly stylised puppet figures have no jointed limbs. A sort of vertical jigging of the puppets from side to side and towards or away from the screen characterises the manipulation. At times the puppets are revolved round on their axis as they are faded in or out. There is no dramatic gesticulation by the puppets since they have no jointed limbs. The art of manipulation lies in creating a suggestive pose by the puppet expressive of the character and its relationship to similarly posed characters and settings. The settings are created by brining onto the screen pieces representing houses, trees, chariots, mountains, etc. Thus the performance acquires the quality of an animated illustration of a musically narrated theme.

Apparently the technique of manipulation in a Ravanachhaya shadow play is very simple but there are subtleties which may escape the notice of a casual onlooker of backstage manipulation. In their movements the puppets should not exactly imitate human beings so that they retain their own fascinating identity. Of all puppets, shadow puppets are the most stylised, but in some forms of shadow play like those of Andhra or Karnataka, the puppets, having many joints, are more articulate. The manipulation of these puppets requires as much dexterity as sensitivity. To suggest that a puppet is walking or fighting when it has no jointed legs or hands indeed calls for great sensitivity since too much jigging is likely to make the movement ludicrous yet too little may make it

dull. Ravanachhaya puppeteers—with only jigging, tilting, fading the puppets in and out—suggest all possible movements and dramatic action. They have absolutely no scope for gimmickry. Those who only want gimmicks from puppets may, therefore, feel bored with a Ravanachhaya show. To appreciate the lyricism of the Ravanachhaya shadows, their graphic quality, their high degree of stylisation and subtle suggestiveness, one has to have the right sensitivity as well as sensibility.

At times the Ravanachhaya shadow show acquires a poetic quality—akin to modern poetry. For instances, when Hanuman gets ready to cross the sea to Lanka, the smaller figure is substituted by a larger one, suggesting that he has expanded himself physically. When he takes the leap, the puppet figure that remained almost pressed to the screen is moved to a distance from it, throwing it diffused but highly fascinating shadow that flashes out of the screen like an agile monsoon cloud. One could go on picking out such prize moments from the show, for instance Hanuman uprooting the trees of Ashok Forest, Indrajit despatching his deadly nagapasha across the sky, the magnificent Ravana fighting Rama and the fascinating shadow-arrows flashing across the screen like dark lightning.

This rare form of shadow playwas on the verge of extinction when the Documentation Unit of the Akademi discovered it in a remote village in April 1971. The only surviving Ravanachhaya puppeteer, Kathinanda Das, was one of the most neglected persons in the village. When the villagers saw us filming, photographing and tape-recording his performance they were amazed. Later on, when the Akademi organised the first ever Festival of Shadow Theatre in 1972, presenting all the styles of

traditional Indian shadow theatre, Kathinanda Das was invited to participate in it. The Akademi has comprehensively documented Ravanachhaya on 16 mm movie film, besides photographs and recordings. The museum of the Akademi has 20 of the most important Ravanachhaya puppets.

NOTES

1. Inscription Nos. 10-11 of Balitung, Cf. Part II, p.241
2. *Silzungsberichre der Berliner Akaemie*, 1906, pp. 398 pf and 1916 pp. 698 ff.
3. *History of Sanskrit Literatrue, p. 501*
4. R. Upadhaya in "The Meaning of Chayanataka" in the Charudeva Shastri Felicitation Volume, p. 527
5. Patanjali's Mahabhasya, 1.4.29; 3.1.28, 6.1.2
6. Schlegel in Tvang Pao Series 1, Vol. IX, pp. 272, writes: "There is no doubt that all these islands, as also Kaling on the main, were founded by Kalinga or Kling colonies who gave the name of their own country to the new settlement".
7. Suvarnadvipa by R.C. Majumdar, Book I, Chapter X, and Book I, Chapter V.
8. Ibid, Book, II, p. 52
9. *The Theatre in Asia*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972, p. 238
10. V.G. Vol. VII, p. 115
11. *Suvarnadvipa*, Book I, Chapter X
12. *Suvarnadviypa*, Book II, p. 52
13. *Purnachandra Odia Bhasa Kosha*, the most authoritative and

exhaustive lexicon in Oriya, Vide page 2322

14. Ibid, p. 1733

15. "...two other important factors which help shed light on the problem, namely, the introduction of Nagri character in writing and the name, Kalinga, to Malay Peninsula, a name still given to Indian immigrants who were brought to the colony as indentured labour in the rubber plantations..." Reginald Le May in Culture of South East Asia, George Allen & Unwin, 1954, p. 85

16. India and Java by Bijan Raj Chatterjee, p. 49

17. History of Orissa by Dr. H.K. Mahtab, p. 9

18. Ibid, p. 23

19. See p. 62 of Rama-Katha (Hindi) byRev. Father Kamil Bulcke

20. Ibid, p. 110, Also, Charles Fabri in History of the Art of Orissa write: "Here, then is a period of some seven hundred years (1st to 6th century A.D.) during which, with very few exception, all art in Orissa was Buddhist, and almost all the exception being to Jainas, not Hindus."

21. Ed. Jain Atmanand Granthamala, Bhavnagar, 1916

22. *History of Oriya Literature* by Mayadhar Mansingh (Sahitya Akademi), p. 114

23. *Odia Sahityara Itihasa* (in Oriya) by Pandit Sooryanarayana Das, p. 291

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In this collection of perceptive essays, Jeevan Pani, poet, translator and art historian, throws light on various performing arts of Orissa. He helped revive some of the dying art forms, among them Ravanachhaya.

Pani taught at National School of Drama and headed the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Kathak Kendra.



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